

Who Were the Maoists?

We confused everything: the political commissar-philosopher's machine gun, the big-hearted anarchist prostitutes, the cunning of the Hegelian concept, the Spanish Civil War, Kyo in [André Malraux's] *La Condition humaine* . . . Jean Jaurès and Lenin, [Paul] Nizan and [Louis] Aragon, the Resistance and the war in Algeria. . . . In sum, I became a Communist because I believed it was the only way to live life like a novel.

—Jean-Paul Dollé, ex-Maoist

“A CIVIL WAR WITHOUT GUNS”

In May 1966 Mao Tse-tung launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, pitting youthful Red Guards against Chinese Communist Party stalwarts and city dwellers suspected of bourgeois habits.¹ To much of the outside world, the Cultural Revolution appeared as a noble attempt to reignite Chinese communism's fading revolutionary ardor. Thereby, perhaps China could escape the bureaucratic sclerosis that had afflicted the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies.

However, we now know that Mao was rapidly losing his grip on power. His credibility as a leader had suffered greatly from the debacle of the Great Leap Forward: the disastrous agricultural modernization scheme that from 1958 to 1961 caused some twenty million senseless, famine-related deaths. Moreover, Mao was aging, having recently turned seventy-three. His rivals in the party hierarchy, Deng Xiaoping,

¹The epigraph is from “Les illusions fécondes de Jean-Paul Dollé,” *Le Monde Dimanche*, October 2, 1983.

Peng Zhen, and Liu Shao-qi, were gradually shunting him aside. To underscore his youthful vigor, in July 1966 Mao took a widely publicized swim in the Yangtze River. Thereby, he sought to convince skeptics that the revolution's fate was inextricably tied to his personal status as hero and leader.

Thus, in part, the Cultural Revolution was a naked power grab, rife with persecution and abuse for anyone who was suspected of being insufficiently revolutionary: "revisionists," "Khrushchevites," and "bourgeois roaders." Mao instructed the Red Guards: "Do not be afraid to make trouble. The more trouble you make and the longer you make it, the better. Confusion and trouble are always noteworthy. . . . Trouble-making is revolutionary."² Such "instructions," or "notifications," would prove a recipe for mass anarchy. It was a strategy Mao set in motion to avenge his political enemies—above all his chief rival, Liu Shao-qi, who in 1959 had succeeded Mao as the People's Republic of China's head of state. At the same time, the Cultural Revolution represented a declaration of war against putative "rightist" tendencies within the Communist Party. The Great Helmsman feared that the party was in danger of producing a new elite of self-satisfied technocrats. As he warned the party leadership in 1965: "The life of sitting on sofas and using electric fans will not do."³

In recent years, Mao had followed developments in Soviet politics with great apprehension: Khrushchev's 1956 Twentieth Party Congress speech denouncing the "crimes of the Stalin era," as well as the Soviet leader's abrupt October 1964 dismissal by the politburo. Communist China's political legitimacy was openly predicated on the Stalinist-authoritarian model. From Mao's vantage point, Khrushchev's 1956 assault on Stalin's "cult of personality" struck close to home. He perceived de-Stalinization as an ignominious ideological retreat that threatened the success of communism worldwide. Although Mao had been openly at odds with the Soviet leader, reviling him as a "revisionist," Khrushchev's ouster raised the specter that before long an analogous fate could befall Mao himself. For all of these reasons Mao felt that the time was

² See Mao, *Mao Papers*, 26–29.

³ Cited in Wakeman, *History and Will*, 306.

ripe to unleash a bold new political initiative that would double as a preemptive strike against potential enemies and rivals.

Significantly, the Cultural Revolution's shock troops, the Red Guards, were composed of high school and university students. They had been issued red armbands, allowing them to wreak havoc with impunity. Their motto, as proclaimed by numerous wall posters, was: "Beat to a pulp any and all persons who go against Mao Tse-tung Thought—no matter who they are, what banner they fly, or how exalted their positions may be."⁴ And so they did.

At one point, Mao abruptly suspended the school system, thereby freeing up millions of students to do his bidding throughout the country. All atavisms of tradition that stood in the way of the socialist system and the dictatorship of the proletariat were fair game. At the instigation of Mao, the students proceeded to "demolish old buildings, temples, and art objects in their towns and villages, and to attack their teachers, school administrators, party leaders and parents."⁵ During the Cultural Revolution victims were forced to march through the streets in dunce caps and with demeaning placards around their necks, proclaiming their guilt before large hostile crowds. Others were made to stand for hours on end "with backs agonizingly bent and arms outstretched in what was called the 'airplane position.'"⁶ Intellectuals especially were frequently beaten and disgraced. Many others committed suicide after enduring unbearable public humiliation. Millions of urban dwellers were forcibly relocated to the countryside, where they were subjected to the "purifying" influence of backbreaking labor.

Mao conceived the Cultural Revolution as the Chinese equivalent of the Paris Commune. It would be, he once claimed, a "nationwide civil war without guns."⁷ One of its goals was to eliminate the risks of class conciliation—for example, revisionist shibboleths concerning "peaceful coexistence"—and to underscore the insuperable "contradiction" (a keyword in the Maoist lexicon) between bourgeois and

⁴ MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, 104.

⁵ Spence, *Search for Modern China*, 575.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Mao Tse-tung, "Vice Chairman Lin's Instruction," *JPRS* (90): 19.

proletarian classes. As modern Communards, the Red Guards would smash the bourgeois state apparatus and reestablish Chinese communism on a secure ideological footing. (Here, one of the ironies was that despite the official appellation “the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” the Chinese working class played a negligible role.) In December 1968, at a point when the social anarchy that had been unleashed seemed unmasterable, Mao reversed course by banishing the Red Guards to the countryside in order to learn “proletarian consciousness” from the peasantry. Mao Tse-tung Thought was nothing if not a mass of contradictions.

The ensuing chaos retarded Chinese economic development by some fifteen years. In the official history of the Chinese Communist Party published in 1981, the Cultural Revolution is described as being responsible for the “severest setbacks and the heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the state and the people since the founding of the People’s Republic.”⁸ One of the jokes that circulated following Mao’s death was that the Cultural Revolution’s goal was to do away with culture.

One of Mao’s chief theoretical texts was “On Contradiction” (1937). There Mao sought to address the asymmetrical relationship between base and superstructure. Given the primacy that dialectical materialism traditionally bestows on the economic base, is it a violation of Marxism, Mao inquires, to ask how one should respond when political and cultural factors assume primacy? “No!” Mao responds emphatically, for while acknowledging the primacy of social being over consciousness, we must also recognize “the reaction of mental on material things, of social consciousness on social being and of the superstructure on the economic base.”⁹

One of the political intentions of Mao’s treatise on materialist epistemology was to elevate China’s standing in the avant-garde of revolutionary struggle, despite its manifest social and economic backwardness. After all, China was a nation that had only recently begun to

⁸ *Resolution on CPC History, 1949–1981* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1981), 32.

⁹ Mao, *On Contradiction*, 36–37.

emerge from its feudal past. Although factories could be found in the large cities, the vast majority of China's population remained peasants—a far cry from the scenario of proletarian revolution envisioned by Marx or even Lenin, who, despite Russia's sizable peasantry, had always attributed a leading role to the working class.

Thus, in an intellectual maneuver that would have significant repercussions for third worldism, Mao's theoretical writings endowed the peasantry with the same potential for class consciousness that Marx had attributed to the working class. Marx had famously maintained that class consciousness was a function of one's relationship to the means of production—hence, the proletariat's putatively privileged revolutionary vantage point. The Great Helmsman updated Marx to suit Chinese circumstances by declaring that class consciousness need not be so narrowly sociologically construed. He contended that class consciousness was a function of a group's *ideological* standing. Since under feudalism and imperialism the peasantry had been brutally oppressed, it, too, had ample incentive to rebel. Mao's stress on the superstructure's relative autonomy also provided license for the revolutionary leadership to indoctrinate workers and peasants to the point where their class consciousness became historically adequate. In essence, it underwrote a theory of educational or cultural dictatorship.

Yet, how exactly might one determine which contradiction plays the leading role at a given historical moment? At this point Mao's "voluntarism" comes into play—a voluntarism that, from Robespierre to Lenin, represented one of the hallmarks of the Jacobin revolutionary tradition. At every key juncture, one needed a knowledgeable revolutionary elite to sort out the various contradictions and to identify the path to genuine class consciousness. Thus, Maoist political thought oscillated between celebrating the virtues of the "mass line"—that is, taking one's lead from the disposition and orientation of "the people"—and revolutionary vanguardism à la Lenin and Robespierre. In a time of crisis, Mao was quick to stress the virtues of political leadership. Ultimately, when it came to revolution, the people were well-meaning amateurs. The party cadres, conversely, were knowledgeable and trustworthy professionals.

“THE YEAR 1967 WILL BE CHINESE”

The year 1967 was Chinese.¹⁰ In Paris signs of Maoism’s popularity abounded. Mao-collared suits—“les cols Maos”—had become immensely fashionable. Try as they might, the clothing boutiques in Paris’s tony sixteenth arrondissement could not keep them in stock. For their part, Left Bank booksellers were perpetually selling out of *Quotations from Chairman Mao. Lui*, the French equivalent of *Playboy*, decided to jump on the pro-Chinese bandwagon by featuring an eight-page spread of scantily clad models in straw hats, red stars, and Red Guard attire. The accompanying captions were culled from the Little Red Book. One striking image portrayed a young woman, unclad and equipped with an automatic rifle, emerging from an enormous white cake. “The revolution is not a dinner party,” read the legend.¹¹

In the world of cinema Jean-Luc Godard’s *La Chinoise*, an alternately whimsical and propagandistic attempt to fathom the wave of Sinophilia cresting in Paris that year, became a succès de scandale. Godard was at the zenith of his cinematic talents. *Weekend*, his breakthrough portrayal of bourgeois decadence, had been released to immense critical acclaim that spring.

Godard described his intentions in an August 1967 interview in *Le Monde*:

Why *La Chinoise*? Because everywhere people are speaking about China. Whether it’s a question of oil, the housing crisis, or education, there is always the Chinese example. China proposes solutions that are unique. . . . What distinguishes the Chinese Revolution and is also emblematic of the Cultural Revolution is *Youth*: the moral and scientific quest, free from prejudices. One

¹⁰ Hamon and Rotman, *Génération* 1:329.

¹¹ Han Suyin, “La Chine aux mille vertus,” *Lui*, June 1967, 36. I am very grateful to Ron Haas for pointing out this side of the Maoist intoxication in his dissertation “The Death of the Angel” (PhD diss., Rice University, 2006).

can't approve of all its forms . . . but this unprecedented cultural fact demands a minimum of attention, respect, and friendship.¹²

La Chinoise was filmed almost entirely in a private apartment at 15, rue Miromesnil, in Paris. The spatial isolation made the film seem something like a gauchiste Robinsonade. The young Maoists had completely turned their backs on the corruptions and lures of bourgeois society. As such, the film became a laboratory experiment or testing ground for the viability of left-wing ideology.

Godard had originally intended to examine the respective merits of Chinese and Soviet Marxism. However, by the time he started filming, the senescence of the Soviet model seemed self-evident.

To the annoyance of viewers with more conventional cinematic expectations, much of *La Chinoise* consisted of didactic political harangues culled from the texts of Saint-Just, Lenin, and, of course, the Great Helmsman himself. It was a tactic Godard had imbibed from Brecht's so-called didactic plays (*Lehrstücke*) and was intended to upend the pretensions of cinematic and theatrical realism. Godard employed the technique to discomfit or "alienate" the viewer: to strip the filmgoer of his or her most reassuring illusions. Plot, narrative, character development—these were some of the vestiges of bourgeois "affirmative" cinema that Godard summarily jettisoned as ideologically compromised. By highlighting the constructed or fabricated nature of cinematic experience, the director hoped to disrupt the complacency with which cinemagoers customarily viewed films. Thereby, Godard sought to remove cinema once and for all from the world of entertainment or modern consumerism.

Fortunately, *La Chinoise* also contained moments of levity reminiscent of the director's pathbreaking nouvelle vague films, as in the scene where the young philosophy student Véronique (played by Godard's wife, Anna Wiazemsky) declares: "The Revolution is an uprising, an act of violence whereby one class overthrows another. As for me, I'm

¹²Jean-Luc Godard, interview with Jean Baby, *Le Monde*, August 24, 1967, 10.

in philosophy class." At that point the screen cuts to an image of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

La Chinoise ends with a lengthy political debate between Véronique and her real-life Nanterre philosophy professor Francis Jeanson—a "Sartrean" who had won notoriety during the Algerian War as a "porteur de valise," or money handler, for the FLN¹³—over the merits of revolutionary violence. At one point Véronique impetuously declares that she wants to "shut down the university with bombs." Jeanson points out that when he was a militant he had an entire people backing his actions. Conversely, Véronique and her fellow Maoists are politically isolated. "I think you are heading down a path that is a perfect dead end," Jeanson concludes resignedly, although, for his part, Godard would later claim that at the time he was more sympathetic to Véronique's point of view.¹⁴

La Chinoise went a long way toward boosting Maoism's political-chic quotient. Within a few years, numerous celebrities would clamber on board the Maoist bandwagon. As one observer cynically observed, among Left Bank intellectuals "radical chic became a form of moral tax deduction."¹⁵ What filmmaker apart from Godard could get away with including the following Althusserian rhetorical gem in a feature film: "The idea of permanent revolution is only valid if the diversity and determination of the teams of political economists allow them to overcome the uncertainties of the conjuncture."¹⁶

Godard went on to make several other pro-Chinese films—including *The Wind from the East* (1969) and *See You at Mao* (1971)—during his stint as a "guerrilla filmmaker" with the Dziga Vertov group, which Godard cofounded with fellow director Jean-Pierre Gorin. In 1970, when the Maoist daily *La Cause du Peuple* was impounded by the Pompidou government and its editors imprisoned, Godard was among the prominent French intellectuals who defied the ban by hawking the proscribed broadsheet on the boulevards of Paris.

¹³ See Hamon and Rotman, *Porteurs de valise*.

¹⁴ Godard, *Jean-Luc Godard*, 303.

¹⁵ Caute, *Year of the Barricades*, 259.

¹⁶ Godard, *Made in USA*, 1967.

If by filming *La Chinoise* Godard's aim had been to ingratiate himself with the Maoist student militants, who had pointedly refused to appear in the film, his efforts fell short. A celebrated May 1968 graffito mocked the Swiss director as "le plus con des suisses pro-Chinois" (the biggest ass among the Swiss pro-Chinese).

THE "NORMAL SCHOOL"

The Maoist temptation began among a group of Louis Althusser's students at the Ecole normale supérieure. The ENS is a training ground for France's intellectual elite. Those who are accepted receive a four-year stipend. Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Raymond Aron, Louis Althusser, and Michel Foucault were all ENS graduates.¹⁷

The students' attraction to Maoism had been piqued by the Sino-Soviet rift of the early 1960s. In 1963 the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party had openly challenged the Soviet Union's leadership of the international Communist movement. The Soviets abruptly recalled some fourteen hundred technicians and experts from China, seriously disrupting Chinese industrial development.

The PCF, headed by a group of unregenerate Stalinists, had become the embodiment of ideological rigidity. In 1956, to the dismay of fellow travelers like Sartre, it unhesitatingly backed the brutal Soviet invasion of Hungary. By the mid-1960s, however, its servility to Moscow had become something of an embarrassment. Increasingly, it had difficulty finding recruits among France's vaunted caste of intellectual mandarins. The PCF recycled the same old "workerist" political line. But increasingly, its slogans were out of touch with the realities of French occupational life, where the ranks of white-collar and service-industry workers were swelling. Moreover, the party was consistently tone-deaf

¹⁷ For the relevant background, see Henri Bourgin, *L'Ecole normale et la politique: De Jean Jaurès à Léon Blum* (Paris: Fayard, 1938). See also Diane Rubenstein, *What's Left? The Ecole normale supérieure and the Right* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

to the political novelties of the 1960s: decolonization, third worldism, not to mention the attractions of “cultural revolution,” which fascinated the student generation. Where, then, might young leftists turn to find a viable oppositional political model?

For a time many of the ENS Maoists tried to make a go of it within the French Communist Party student organization, the Union des étudiants communistes (UEC). They hatched a Machiavellian scheme, known as “entrisme,” to transform the UEC along less dogmatic lines from within. For this reason, they came to be known as the Italians, since among West European Communists, the Italian Communist Party displayed the greatest independence from Moscow. But once their plot was uncovered, they were, in good Bolshevik fashion, summarily purged. In 1966 the student Maoists started their own organization, the Union des jeunes communistes marxistes-léninistes (UJC-ML). The “marxiste-léniniste” suffix was a sign of the times. It indicated that UJC adherents were genuine revolutionaries, unlike the PCF “revisionists,” who seemed more concerned with electoral success and trade union gains than the virtues of armed struggle.

Hence, curiously, while America’s “best and brightest”—the Harvard graduates who served in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations—were prosecuting the Vietnam War, their opposite numbers in France, the so-called Ulmards (the Ecole normale was located on the rue d’Ulm, in the heart of the Latin Quarter) were planning trips to China, copiously citing the Little Red Book, and praising the virtues of a “war of position” against the bourgeois enemy.¹⁸

REDISCOVERING MARXISM WITH ALTHUSSER

Recent political developments had placed the Maoists’ spiritual mentor, Louis Althusser, in an awkward position. Althusser was a devout Communist who revered Stalinism as the movement’s glorious pinnacle. He viewed Khrushchev’s Twentieth Party Congress speech, exposing

¹⁸ See André Glucksmann, “Strategy and Revolution in France 1968,” *New Left Review* 52 (1968).

the “crimes of the Stalin era,” as a departure from orthodoxy that had opened the door to the flaccid heresies of revisionism. Already during the 1950s, Althusser sensed the threat that the new antiscientific Marxist lexicon represented to the standpoint of Soviet orthodoxy. In Eastern Europe, Marxist humanism, in the guise of “socialism with a human face,” would culminate in the ill-fated Prague Spring of 1968. Althusser’s theoretical efforts (under the aegis of structuralism) to restore Marxism’s respectability as “science” were directed against the threats posed by the growing popularity of “Marxist humanism,” whose chief French representatives were PCF philosopher Roger Garaudy and Sartre. In Althusser’s view the softening of the party line, the retreat from “science” in favor of the effete philosophical standpoint of “Western Marxism,” risked effacing the all-important difference between genuine communism and social democracy.¹⁹

In the PCF, dissent was tantamount to sacrilege, grounds for expulsion. Althusser’s dilemma was clear. Following the Sino-Soviet rift, one could not be both a card-carrying member of the PCF and pro-Chinese. It was a case of either-or. When, in 1967, the ENS students published a special issue of their journal praising the achievements of the Cultural Revolution, Althusser contributed, but without affixing his byline, lest he run afoul of party authorities. For their part, the students decided to overlook the tension between their own political “voluntarism”—their exaltation of “revolutionary will”—and Althusser’s inflexible structuralism, which belittled human agency in favor of indubitable scientific axioms. As one commentator aptly noted, the peculiar alliance between Althusser and the gauchistes “made possible a paradoxical bringing together of an often mad political voluntarism—a desperate activism—and the notion of a subjectless process that resembled a mystical commitment.”²⁰

The normaliens wagered that by sacrificing themselves as autonomous “subjects” and integrating themselves with the “logic of history,” they would be redeemed. As an additional benefit, they would thereby

¹⁹ See the discussion of “Western Marxism” in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Signs*, trans. Richard McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

²⁰ Dosse, *History of Structuralism* 1:299.

negate the taint of their own bourgeois class background. In their approach to Marx, the UJC militants craved an element of certainty that structuralist thinkers—Fernand Braudel, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Claude Lévi-Strauss—had been able to confer on other disciplines and fields. The austerity of Althusser's philosophical doctrines projected an air of uncompromising theoretical rigor that the young normaliens found seductive. They yearned for an absolute, and Althusser's iron-clad distinction between "science" (Marxism) and "ideology" (the delusions of bourgeois humanism) provided it. But was not structuralism, with its inordinate focus on "discourse" and "theory," in the end patently "idealistic"—hence, incompatible with the requirements of Marxism qua materialism? The normaliens rationalized this dilemma with loose speculation about the "materiality of the signifier."

At the time, Hegelianism and phenomenology—as dominated by the three *Hs*, Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger—were the leading strands of French philosophy. From an intellectual standpoint, Althusser's structuralism offered a novel, nonacademic approach that students found refreshing vis-à-vis the shopworn pieties of republican humanism. Structural linguistics attacked the delusions of authorship (we do not speak language; instead, "language speaks us"); structural anthropologists and psychoanalysts attacked the paradigm of "consciousness"; Althusserians, for their part, sought to "joyfully bury humanism like the pitiful remnants of a bygone era of triumphant bourgeois thinking."²¹

Althusser's structuralism stressed Marxism's status as a self-enclosed, autochthonous conceptual system. Marx's theoretical corpus contained absolute truth—as long as one knew how to read it and what to look for. By emphasizing Marxism's internal coherence, Althusser sought to safeguard its doctrinal purity, no matter how badly the theory might play out in reality. Stalin may have committed egregious crimes; the Soviet Union might be a degenerate workers' state; yet Marxism's pristine theoretical truths would persevere unscathed. But what sense did

²¹ *Ibid.*, 291. Apropos of Lévi-Strauss: an oft-told anecdote places him at a Berkeley restaurant following a campus lecture. When the Lévi-Strauss party arrives to claim its reservation, the owner quips: "The blue jeans manufacturer or the anthropologist?"

it make to embalm Marxism as a body of pristine a priori truths when it was intended as an explanation of real history?

In retrospect, it seems clear that subtending Althusser's "scientism" lay a nostalgia for Stalinism: a deep-seated intolerance for aleatory perspectives and views. In many respects, Althusser's structuralism did for Marxist philosophy what Zhdanov's doctrine of socialist realism had done for the arts in the 1930s. During the 1930s Althusser belonged to a militant Catholic organization, Action catholique. Commentators have speculated that following World War II, the philosopher transposed his fervent quest for absolute truth from the church to the Communist Party. Was it mere coincidence that toward the end of his life Althusser lobbied the Vatican for a private audience with Pope John Paul II?²²

The French Communist Party viewed structuralism disparagingly, since it scorned history in favor of timeless constructs. Marxism prided itself on its theory of history, which prophesied capitalism's decline and the proletariat's inevitable triumph. Nevertheless, since at the time structuralism was enjoying such an unparalleled vogue—France's leading thinkers, Barthes, Braudel, Foucault, Lacan, and Lévi-Strauss, were all structuralists—the party tolerated Althusser's theoretical views as a much-needed source of intellectual prestige. His regeneration of Marxist theory might offset the taint that communism had in the eyes of French intellectuals following the 1956 Hungarian debacle.

Althusser was sympathetic to aspects of Chinese communism. In his view, under Mao's leadership China's leaders displayed a revolutionary vitality that had long ceased to exist among their geriatric counterparts in Eastern Europe. Paradoxically, one of the main reasons Althusser admired Chinese communism was that its leaders had remained unwavering Stalinists. Khrushchevism, with its conciliatory rhetoric of "peaceful coexistence," had opened Pandora's box to all manner of political slackness. Hence, some of Althusser's early texts featured guarded allusions to Chinese developments.

²² According to sources familiar with the story, Althusser's request was granted. But a few weeks later, he strangled his wife, Héléne, and the plans were promptly abandoned.

Althusser's 1962 essay "Contradiction and Overdetermination" is a good case in point.²³ Although Mao's name appears nowhere in the article, the essay is an extended commentary on the Great Helmsman's disquisition "On Contradiction." Since to cite Mao directly would have constituted grounds for immediate expulsion, as a substitute Althusser invoked an 1890 letter by Engels claiming that the economic "base," though indispensable, is far from being all-determinant, thus allowing for the quasi-autonomy of cultural and political developments. Althusser rightly sensed that Soviet Marxism had congealed into an inflexible economic determinism. The virtue of Mao's essay was that it acknowledged that "base" and "superstructure" did not always stand in a direct, causal relationship. Instead, often they stood *in contradiction to one another*. In pursuing this tack, Althusser sought to expand the purview of Marxist theory so that it would be capable of engaging new cultural and intellectual challenges.

Althusser's students, conversely, operated under no such prohibitions. Their enthusiasm for revolutionary China was zealous and unqualified, although almost none of them could read Chinese, and reliable information about contemporary China was extremely scarce. As of 1965—Althusser's *annus mirabilis*, when both *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* appeared—the students began airing their radical political views in the self-published *Cahiers marxistes-léninistes*. The editors were Robert Linhart, Jacques-Alain Miller, and Jacques Rancière. In 1967 epistemologist Dominique Lecourt took over as editor-in-chief. The student activists came to view their four-year ENS stipend as a subvention that allowed them to militate full-time.

French Maoism operated at a dangerous remove from the reality principle. Mao's China became a projection—a Rohrschach test—for the students' overheated revolutionary fantasies. With Soviet communism substantially discredited, revolutionary China, along with other third-world experiments in state socialism (North Vietnam, Cuba, and so on), seemed to embody the last best hope for a left-wing alternative to the dislocations of Western modernity: overcrowded cities, urban

²³ Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination," in *For Marx*.

blight, ghetto uprisings (in the United States, at least), industrially scarred landscapes, and massive pollution.

Looking back, a leading Maoist militant, Roland Castro, explained the basis underlying the students' attraction to Maoism as follows:

The first message we received from China: *revolution within the revolution*. The second message we received (though fewer of us this time): *revolution of civilization*. The third message we received: Seven hundred million Chinese people is not a kibbutz; it's not a phalanstery; it's not a splinter group. It's a quarter of the world, an empire in the center of the world, in the center of the world that it was about to implode. We could hear the implosion.²⁴

"*Revolution within the revolution*" meant that by stressing the primacy of cultural and ideological themes, Maoism had beneficially broadened the scope of revolutionary struggle. Revolutionary discourse was no longer governed by the administrative-managerial mentality of Eastern European socialism. "*Revolution of civilization*" meant that radical politics no longer pertained to questions of social engineering, as in Lenin's infamous definition of "socialism" as "the Soviets plus electrification." Instead it bespoke a qualitative transformation of everyday life. Hence, the popular May 1968 slogan, borrowed from Rimbaud, "Changer la vie!" (Change life!) "Seven hundred million Chinese people is not a kibbutz" meant that the Cultural Revolution could not be dismissed as an epiphenomenon or a blip. At stake were events of epochal significance that portended nothing less than a wholesale transformation of humanity's capacity for political self-organization.

REVOLUTIONARY TOURISM

In August 1967 the UJC-ML leadership—Robert Linhart, Jacques Broyelle, Christian Riss, and Jean-Pierre Le Dantec—made a life-transforming pilgrimage to China. Upon their return, in *Garde Rouge*

²⁴ Castro, 1989.

they praised China's first hydrogen bomb detonation as "An immortal victory for Mao Tse-tung thought."²⁵ Since the People's Republic of China was itself in the throes of an immense political purge (the Cultural Revolution), Linhart decided his group should follow suit and extirpate the last vestiges of the "petty bourgeois intellectualism." It was at this point that the Maoists, in vintage Oedipal fashion, turned against Althusser, who had repeatedly refused to renounce his Communist Party membership and join forces with the UJC-ML.

The pro-Chinese activists who made pilgrimages to the People's Republic of China engaged in blind acts of "revolutionary tourism." They visited prefabricated Potemkin villages and were perpetually accompanied by party-appointed "handlers." They returned to France to publish florid reminiscences praising the superiority of the Chinese path to socialism.²⁶ As the Italian Communist writer Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi enthused in her travel memoir *De la Chine*,

[Here is] a people marching with a light step and with fervor toward the future. This people may be the incarnation of the new civilization of the world. China has made an unprecedented leap into history. . . . Mao is essentially antidogmatic and antiauthoritarian. He prizes the initiative of the masses over the primacy of the [production] apparatus, he insists on the principle of equality, he repeats that the party cannot be a substitute for the masses and that the masses must liberate themselves.²⁷

The complexities and sordid realities of contemporary Chinese politics mattered little. What counted was that the illusion of a radiant utopian future was preserved. Thus, for all their rebelliousness, the Maoist normaliens merely repeated the mistakes of a previous generation of leftists, who, led by prestigious literati such as Henri Barbusse

²⁵ Bourseiller, *Maoïstes*, 81. For an excellent overview, see Julian Bourg, "The Red Guards of Paris: French Student Maoism of the 1960s," *History of European Ideas* 4 (31) (2005): 472–90.

²⁶ See, for example, the influential account of Claudie Broyelle, *La moitié du ciel* (Paris: Denoël-Gonthier, 1973).

²⁷ Macciocchi, *De la Chine*, 466; see also Moravia, *Révolution culturelle*.

and Romain Rolland, had uncritically sung the praises of Stalinist Russia during the 1930s.²⁸

Long after his initial visit to the People's Republic, Jacques Broyelle, one of the UJC-ML leaders, returned to confront his party-appointed chaperone. "You only showed us the positive side of Chinese communism," complained Broyelle. "We showed you what you wanted to see," his Chinese counterpart retorted.

The students' Maoist intoxication testified to an enduring trope of French cultural life, Orientalism—the idea that an infusion of "primitive" energies from non-Western lands would offset European decadence and revitalize France qua metropole-in-decline. Eugène Delacroix's sprawling depictions of Oriental decadence, André Malraux's revolutionary romanticism in *La condition humaine* (set during the early phases of the Chinese civil war during the late 1920s), and Paul Nizan's youthful memoir, *Aden, Arabie*, all fit the mold. At odds with their elders, frustrated with metropolitan France's cultural insularity, politically homeless under de Gaulle's eleven-year autocratic reign, the student militants sought out an alternative political reality light-years removed from the prosaic historical present in which they felt trapped.

It seemed that the less information the students possessed concerning the People's Republic and the greater China's geographic and cultural remove from Europe, the more leeway they had to project their own utopian hopes and dreams. Still, important aspects of their pro-Chinese worldview were reality based. They venerated Mao as one of the titans of the twentieth-century revolutionary tradition. He was perceived as a creative interpreter of Marxist doctrine, someone who was both an activist and a theorist. His interpretation of class struggle incorporated the peasantry, an innovation that was central for Asian and South American third worldism. Moreover, the Great Helmsman's personal saga as a figure who, following countless military and political setbacks, persevered until he finally succeeded in driving Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang from the mainland, was a narrative that fascinated revolutionary romantics worldwide.

²⁸ See Hourmant, *Au pays de l'avenir radieux*. To his credit, Gide, in *Retour de l'URSS*, sounded a skeptical note.

In addition to being a gifted military strategist, Mao was an intellectual—among the habitués of Left Bank society, an inestimable source of prestige. Along with his capacious theoretical writings, he also wrote poetry! Among the Parisian literati, the fact that Mao had unleashed a *cultural* revolution carried great weight. It accounted for the innovative character of Chinese communism vis-à-vis its drab, *dirigiste* Soviet counterpart. Among the normaliens and their sympathizers, the fact that Chinese students had been called upon to play the role of a revolutionary avant-garde appeared to cinch matters. Thus, from a French perspective the Cultural Revolution seemed to strike all the right chords.

From its inception the Cultural Revolution generated global support and admiration for the Chinese cause, and not just among leftists. Sinologists, foreign service officers, and amateur China watchers worldwide believed that revolutionary China represented an alternative path to modernity, one that avoided the West's dismal excesses and missteps. As Harvard Sinologist John K. Fairbank wrote in 1972: "The people seem healthy, well fed and articulate about their role as citizens of Chairman Mao's new China. . . . The change in the countryside is miraculous. . . . The Maoist revolution is on the whole *the best thing that happened to the Chinese people in centuries.*"²⁹

During the 1960s a deep-seated disenchantment with Western modernity prevailed. The consensus was that something had drastically gone wrong. The ghettos of major American cities—Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles—were periodically consumed in flames. Anarchists and student revolutionaries rocked Europe's capitals with violent protests. In Germany and Italy terrorist cells engendered a siege mentality. For many observers China became the beneficiary of the West's loss of self-confidence.

Under Mao's benevolent tutelage, China had learned how to harness the power of the masses. It pursued an approach to industrialization that was self-evidently more humane. The new China seemed to provide something for everyone: "for the puritan, a hardworking, simple,

²⁹ John K. Fairbank, "The New China and the American Connection," *Foreign Affairs* (October 1972): 31, 36; emphasis added.

efficiently modernizing country; for the cultural connoisseur, thousands of years of Chinese culture; for the frustrated leftist, a Marxist-Leninist regime restoring the good name of Marxism; above all, and for most visitors, there was a land of mystery, beauty, purpose, and order, a former victim acquiring power and dignity.”³⁰ While the West coped with endless social and political strife, under Mao’s leadership, revolutionary China seemed to embody a refreshing unity of purpose. It was hard to argue with the robust political enthusiasm of seven hundred million Chinese.

Like many gauchistes, the Maoist student radicals were self-avowed sectarians. Alienated from mainstream French society, their political zealotry provided their lives with purpose and meaning. From a social-psychological standpoint, Maoism allowed a gifted contingent of French youth to resolve problems of identity formation amid a turbulent and confusing era. Involvement with the UJC—and later on, with its successor, the Gauche prolétarienne (GP)—provided student activists with an integral credo or worldview. In their devotion to their chosen political cause, the Maoists exhibited the fervor of true believers. Moreover, the role that bourgeois self-hatred played in their pro-Chinese worldview was inestimable.

The ethic of total commitment protected adherents from the risks of social atomization. Among diehard militants, Maoism became a vehicle of what Max Weber called “inner-worldly salvation.” As believers, the activists were “saved” or “redeemed.” As Jacques Broyelle acknowledged in retrospect: “The UJC-ML was a totalitarian society in miniature, with one significant difference: we didn’t have the power to manipulate the material parameters that, in a socialist country, determine people’s lives. Moreover, it was a servitude to which we consented voluntarily.”³¹

The student Maoists seized on aspects of Chinese Communist doctrine they found congenial to their ends. Mao’s voluntarism—his belief that revolution depended not on objective conditions but on heroic acts of will—well suited their own youthful insurrectionary

³⁰ Hollander, *Political Pilgrims*, 287.

³¹ Quoted *ibid.*, 337.

exuberance.³² Owing to their belief in spontaneity, among PCF supporters the Maoists were derisively known as “les Maos-Spontex.” Spontex also happened to be the name of a widely advertised, fast-cleaning sponge. Mao was widely viewed as a genuine populist who kept the people’s interest foremost in mind. His political texts brimmed with praise for the “masses,” who possessed an innate revolutionary potential waiting to be tapped by politically enlightened cadres. Last, Mao’s notion of “permanent revolution” also resonated among denizens of Paris’s Left Bank. It would ensure that, unlike its Soviet counterpart, Chinese communism would not succumb to the heresies of “revisionism.”

For its part, the French Communist Party was endemically conservative. It had become so successful in the Fifth Republic’s party system that it hesitated to rock the boat. The PCF greeted the May student revolt with incomprehension and condescension, dismissing the student militants as irredeemably bourgeois. Their “class character” meant that they were intrinsically unserviceable for revolutionary ends. If the student insurrection lacked an identifiable proletarian component, why bother to support it, reasoned the Communists.

THE SAGA OF THE *ETABLIS*

The Maoists’ political itinerary is inseparable from the saga of the *établissements*—literally, the “shop floor.” As we have noted, Mao identified the masses as the touchstone of political authenticity. On many occasions he instructed party members to commingle with the rural masses as a method of raising political consciousness. He declared in a 1957 speech: “We recommend that intellectuals go among the masses, in the factories, in the countryside. . . . Our politicians, our writers, our artists, our teachers, and our scientific workers must

³² As Spence aptly notes in *Search for Modern China*, 546: “The roots of Mao’s radical thinking had always lain in the voluntaristic, heroic workings of the human will and the power of the masses that he had celebrated in his earliest writings.”

seize every occasion available to enter into contact with workers and peasants.”³³

The student Maoists took this suggestion to heart. In keeping with Mao's slogan “One must get down from the horse in order to pluck the flowers,” they consigned themselves to arduous factory work in the provinces. There, they would blend in with the proletarian milieus, all the while trying to redirect the workers' focus away from trade union demands (salary increases and improved working conditions) and toward the ends of political struggle. The situation placed the student activists under considerable psychological stress, for in order to gain acceptance among their fellow workers, they were forced to conceal their backgrounds as sons and daughters of privilege and as normaliens.

Among the Maoists, to “establish” oneself in a provincial factory became a rite of passage, an act of political self-sacrifice that doubled as a test of one's revolutionary mettle. At its height, some two to three thousand students participated in the *établi* movement, though not all were Maoist. The *établi* phenomenon was a vehicle via which leftists could divest themselves of their bourgeois origins and demonstrate their proletarian bona fides. The Maoists prided themselves on their dedication to “practice,” as opposed to “theory,” which was ironic, since as normaliens they represented France's intellectual elite. Moreover, the stress placed on proximity to the masses entailed a marked anti-intellectual dimension. UJC-ML leader Robert Linhart commented that during his stint as an *établi* he once went two years without cracking open a book.

During the 1980s many ex-Maoists, including Linhart, wrote revealing memoirs recounting their experiences as *établis*. Often, the working conditions were excruciating. Hailing from privileged backgrounds, many of them had never done a day's manual labor in their entire lives. Thus, they frequently had great difficulty completing their assigned tasks. One young Maoist recounted how she obtained work in a factory that manufactured copper plating. By midafternoon, her hands were bloody. The foreman politely recommended that she find

³³ Cited in Dressen's *De l'amphi à l'établi*, 7.

alternative employment. She left the factory in tears.³⁴ Another memoir insightfully depicts the mind-numbing, Sisyphean drudgery at a provincial automobile plant:

As soon as the car has been fitted into the assembly line it begins its half-circle, passing each successive position for soldering or another complementary operation, such as filing, grinding, hammering. . . . A few knocks, a few sparks, then the soldering's done and the car's already on its way out of the three or four yards of this position. And the next car's already coming into the work area. And the worker starts again. Sometimes, if he's been working fast, he has a few seconds' respite before a new car arrives; either he takes advantage of it to breathe for a moment, or else he intensifies his effort and "goes up the line" so that he can gain a little time, in other words he works further ahead, outside his normal area, together with the worker at the preceding position. And after an hour or two he's amassed the incredible capital of two or three minutes in hand, that he'll use up smoking a cigarette. . . . Short-lived happiness: the next car's already there: he'll have to work on it at his usual position this time, and the race begins again, in the hope of gaining one or two yards, "moving up" in the hope of another peaceful cigarette. . . .

Through the gaps in this gray, gliding line I can glimpse a war of attrition: death versus life and life versus death. Death: being caught up in the line, the imperturbable gliding of cars, the repetition of identical gestures, the work that's never finished. If one car's done, the next one isn't, and it's already there, unsoldered at the precise spot that's just been done, rough at the precise spot that's just been polished. . . . The aggressive wear and tear of the assembly line is experienced violently by everyone: city workers and peasants, intellectual and manual workers, immigrants and Frenchman [*sic*]. It's not unusual to see a new recruit give up after his first day, driven mad by the noise, the sparks, the inhuman pressure of speed, the harshness of endlessly repetitive work, the

³⁴ Bourseiller, *Maoïstes*, 84.

authoritarianism of the bosses and the severity of the orders, the dreary prison-like atmosphere which makes the shop so frigid.³⁵

The UJC-ML militants were known as a groupuscule. This was an insult coined by PCF officials to mock the Maoists' paucity of adherents. Who, after all, read the jargonized articles that appeared in *Cahiers Marxist-Léninistes*? At one point the UJC-ML leadership lobbied Beijing for official recognition but were politely rebuffed. The student revolutionaries' numbers (approximately thirty-five militants in 1967) were too small. In response, the Maoists organized a nationwide anti-Vietnam War protest movement among *lycées* and universities throughout France, *Comités Vietnams de bases* (CVBs). The number of pro-Chinese activists swelled to two thousand.

In keeping with another precept of Mao Tse-tung Thought, "Unless one has made an investigation, one doesn't have the right to speak," the Maoists also conducted "investigations" (*enquêtes*) of working-class conditions to familiarize themselves with the habitudes and mind-set of the class that, according to orthodox Marxist catechism, represented humanity's future.³⁶ There follows the testimony of one UJC-ML activist about the enquête he and his fellow militants undertook in the Vosges region of eastern France. The description of his blind ideological devotion and the difficult choices he faced as an *établi* are fairly typical.

I joined the UJC-ML in 1967. At the time one felt that if one wanted to understand something about working-class reality, one

³⁵ Robert Linhart, *The Assembly Line*, trans. Margaret Crosland (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 15, 17, 26.

³⁶ For Mao's explanation of this idea and its importance, see *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, 230:

Everyone engaged in practical work must investigate conditions at the lower levels. Such investigation is especially necessary for those who know theory but do not know the actual conditions, for otherwise they will not be able to link theory with practice. Although my assertion, 'No investigation, no right to speak,' has been ridiculed as 'narrow empiricism,' to this day I do not regret having made it; far from regretting it, I still insist that without investigation there cannot be any right to speak.

had to go directly there, to plunge in. . . . As Chairman Mao once said: "One can't understand the working class if one keeps it at arm's length." I didn't undertake the decision to live in a factory on theoretical grounds. It was a collective decision I made with my comrades in the UJC-ML. At this point in time [1967], our primary focus was studying the works of Chairman Mao, who repeatedly said that one must think in line with the majority. The "majority" is the people. One can't think about revolution without understanding the people's opinion. Thus, that summer, we launched our enquêtes about country life. We went there to live among the farmers. We called it: *Investigations in the Countryside*.

By the end of the summer, we decided that one of us should remain to continue the enquête. I volunteered. I thought it would suffice to remain close to the workers, so I took a job as an apprentice at a school that trains construction workers and masons. By the end of the month I realized that I would understand nothing about the reality of workers' lives in this region . . . unless I worked in a factory. So long as I was content to sit in a café, or to stand by the factory gate, I would understand nothing. I had to go inside the factory, with the workers.

I stayed for six months. It was hard! I didn't know how to manage the work. I had read Mao's books, but that was all. . . . It was the dead of winter. I had to get out of there!³⁷

LOST ILLUSIONS

Ultimately, the UJC-ML's ideological inflexibility proved to be its undoing. When 1968 rolled around, the militants' servile reverence for Maoist doctrine led them to misapprehend the nature and scope of the May revolt. They had become prisoners of their own political dogmatism.

Since the May uprising was initially a *student* revolt, and since the students were predominantly *bourgeois*, the Maoists dismissed the

³⁷ Manceaux, *Maos en France*, 54–56.

rebellion as politically irrelevant. The insurrection failed to conform to their narrow-minded ideal of political class. They misunderstood the futility of transposing a model of political struggle conceived in a rural, semifeudal developing nation such as China to a hypermodern society like France.

Unlike China, France was hardly a peasant society. As countless studies attested, by the 1960s French occupational life was highly stratified. Hence, it bore little resemblance to the sociological presuppositions of classical Marxism: a mass of destitute proletarians on one side and a handful of affluent capitalists on the other. The French working class, although oppressed, was far from impoverished. Moreover, its numbers were rapidly shrinking, and a new class of salaried employees, largely in the tertiary or service sector, was on the rise.

The May uprising's goal was not to seize political power à la Lenin and the Bolsheviks, but to democratize decision-making processes in government, education, and the workplace. In the main, it targeted the authoritarian disposition of French administrative elites. Rather than focusing on the traditional concerns of class politics, the student protesters targeted qualitative issues pertaining to the "politics of everyday life": the rise of consumer society, the accelerated pace of modernization, and the dilapidated condition of French universities.

Over the course of the previous decade, the terms of political struggle had been redefined. Left-wing groupuscules like the Situationist International addressed these problems directly. But since none of these issues and concerns had been treated in the Little Red Book, for the UJC-ML brain trust they remained immaterial. In the words of Pierre Victor: "We were profoundly mistrustful vis-à-vis the student movement. We had a very, very narrow proletarian perspective. We thought: if the students don't go to the factory gates, they have no future; their future will be that of the bourgeoisie."³⁸ Caught entirely off guard by the May uprising, the Maoist leadership elected to condemn it.

For the Maoists, things would only get worse before they got better. Uncertain as to how they should react to the May insurrection, like true sectarians, the leadership began to succumb to political paranoia. Their

³⁸ Ibid., 188.

official political line held that the student uprising was a plot hatched by de Gaulle and the French state to ensnare and crush the French proletariat. They feared that if the working classes allied themselves with the student protesters, the government would use it as a pretext to carry out a major wave of repression: a massacre reminiscent of the "June days" of 1848 or the Paris Commune, when some twenty thousand workers were slain by the National Guard.

Just when it appeared that things could not get any worse, as the May events crested UJC-ML leader Robert Linhart suffered a nervous breakdown. On the Night of the Barricades (May 10–11), as the student radicals tried to seal off the Latin Quarter from an impending attack by the riot police, Linhart made an emergency visit to the Chinese embassy, detailing the implausible entrapment theory just outlined. The Chinese diplomats looked on in bewilderment. Under the pressure of the moment, and seeing no way out, Linhart panicked and boarded a train to the provinces. His collapse required months of hospitalization and subsequent medical treatment.

By May 13, when the working class joined the student protesters in full force, individual Maoists had begun participating in the immense demonstrations that were convulsing metropolitan France. But during the uprising's first week, from May 3 to May 10, the Maoists were AWOL. The greatest revolutionary upsurge in postwar Europe had taken place, and the Maoists had missed it. They had learned the Maoist revolutionary catechism by heart, but when their generation's defining political moment occurred, they failed to recognize it, even though it had transpired directly beneath their dormitory windows in the heart of the Latin Quarter.

In June Minister of the Interior Raymond Marcellin warned in a nationally televised speech, "In all countries of the world . . . there are Maoist parties and Marxist-Leninists. . . . It is reasonable to say—and the information at my disposal allows me to say it—that the ringleaders know one another. It is easy to imagine who the ringleader of Maoism and Marxism-Leninism might be."³⁹ Of course, it was none other than Mao himself! Marcellin insinuated that the Maoists represented a fifth

³⁹ Cited in Bourseiller's *Maoïstes*, 99.

column that was secretly in the pay of Beijing.⁴⁰ He proceeded to ban the UJC-ML as a subversive organization.

For the Maoist normaliens, the summer of 1968 was a time for soul-searching—and, in good pro-Chinese fashion, a period of collective self-criticism. The UJC-ML leadership was filled with self-reproach. Under Linhart's guidance, they had followed a narrowly "ouvriériste" political line, thus misapprehending the student uprising's political nature and import. The realization had gradually taken hold that although working-class concerns remained significant, other political struggles were equally deserving of attention. The crisis of French society that exploded during May suggested that political radicalism far transcended the strictures of the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. Above all, the Maoists had misjudged the nature of the "cultural revolution" that had been building up in the years prior to 1968. As one repentant Maoist would acknowledge, "For a long time a sectarian ideology dominated our ranks, holding the students in contempt and underestimating their capacity to revolt against bourgeois society."⁴¹ For the Maoists this realization became one of May 1968's foremost political lessons. The post-May era witnessed the emergence of a plethora of new political struggles and social movements: the women's movement, gay liberation, prisoners' rights, and environmentalism. Henceforth, it would prove increasingly difficult to claim that any one of these struggles merited exclusive priority.

The May events had convinced militant Tiennot Grumbach (nephew of former prime minister Pierre Mendès-France) that it was the *libertarian* side of the student revolt that represented the movement's enduring contribution. He and a handful of Nanterre enragés founded a new group, Vive la révolution! Inspired by Situationist doctrines, it focused on "cultural politics" and "everyday life." In the 1969 inaugural issue of their publication, Grumbach and his fellow "anarcho-Maoists" realized that their servile adherence to Mao Tse-tung Thought had led them badly astray. They sought to definitively jettison the sectarian mind-set that they had once held dear:

⁴⁰ See Marcellin's *mémoire*, *L'importune vérité*.

⁴¹ See the detailed UJC-ML self-critique "Projet d'autocritique," in Kessel's *Mouvement maoïste*, 96–107.

We disagree profoundly with those who seek to turn the page as quickly as possible as if nothing had happened. This time we do not want to squander an opportunity for understanding by hastily reconstituting a groupuscule [the UJC-ML] that would once again isolate us from the main movement, that would render us incapable of responding to questions, that would render us impervious to reality. . . . Many comrades have cursed the organization [the UJC-ML] that forbade them to participate in the mass movement of May '68 or to help it to develop. . . . The general will of our comrades has been not to reconstitute groupuscules but to avoid the "groupusculation" of the movement in order to preserve the May movement's unity. . . . Prior to May, to be a Marxist-Leninist was on the whole very simple: every time a problem presented itself, one could resolve it by citing Chairman Mao and then going peacefully off to bed. After May things became a lot more complicated: to cite Mao no longer made an impression on anyone.⁴²

The UJC-ML split into two factions. One group, the "liquidationists," concluded that the May revolt had foundered for lack of a vanguard party to lead the way. As the authors of *Vers la guerre civile* observed, "In May—and still today—the mass movement's absence of a center deprived this movement of an instrument of struggle and knowledge. This absence . . . is also indicative of the movement's current weakness."⁴³ But before rushing out to found yet another political party, the group needed to steep itself in Marxist theory. Thereby, it could be certain that the party would have the proper theoretical foundation. The so-called liquidationists repaired to the ENS library to study and read. During the post-May period, the popularity of Lenin's 1902 Bolshevik manifesto *What Is to Be Done?* reputedly soared. In this way, this faction, led by ex-teachers' union president Alain Geismar, returned to its Marxist-Leninist roots.

⁴² *Vive La Révolution!* 1 (July–August 1969): 74. The FER, or Fédération des étudiants révolutionnaires, was an offshoot of the Lambertist Trotskyist CLER group (Comité de liaison des étudiants révolutionnaires), which was established on April 28, 1968.

⁴³ Geismar, July, and Morane, *Vers la guerre civile*, 15.

In addition to the UJC-ML, Marcellin barred several other left-wing groups, including the rival Maoist PCFML (an offshoot of the PCF that was officially allied with Beijing) and the Trotskyist Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR). In June 1968 his ministry sent in riot police to summarily quash the residual factory occupations. Following the elections that month, the Gaullists triumphantly returned to power. The elections, and the wave of repression that had preceded them, convinced the Maoists that "French fascism" was setting in. They believed that France was on the verge of becoming another Portugal, with General de Gaulle playing the role of Salazar, who ruled Portugal with an iron fist from 1932 to 1968. Between 1969 and 1970 a total of forty-three films were banned by the French minister of culture on the grounds of "mental toxicity." By 1970 French authorities had placed more than one hundred activists behind bars.

The second UJC-ML faction, numbering forty or fifty militants, formed the Gauche prolétarienne. With Pierre Victor at the helm, it reaffirmed the group's earlier political line. Now more than ever, militants needed to merge with the urban and rural masses, who embodied humanity's glorious revolutionary future. In Victor's eyes the May events proved what he and like-minded militants had wanted to believe all along: advanced industrial society was eminently susceptible to massive revolutionary upheaval. The June Days that followed the May uprising were punctuated by wildcat strikes at factory plants throughout the Paris region. The working class had not been wholly seduced by the blandishments of the "affluent society." Undoubtedly, before long, another revolutionary upsurge would be in the offing. It was a revolutionary militant's solemn task to prepare for this eventuality. Victor compared the Maoists' temporary retreat following the setbacks of June 1968 to the Chinese Communists' 1934 Long March, when Mao's army trekked some four thousand miles to escape annihilation by Kuomintang forces at Jiangxi. Out of an original one hundred thousand troops, a mere seven thousand survived.

And thus, out of the UJC-ML's ashes rose the Gauche prolétarienne (GP), which was established by Victor and several others in September 1968. One lesson the GP militants had learned from the May-June factory occupations pertained to the issue of working-class

stratification—not only the division between unskilled and skilled workers (known as “OS,” or *ouvriers spécialisés*) but also the important differences between indigenous workers and the estimated 3.5 million immigrant laborers currently residing in France. In the post-May period, the GP would increasingly turn its attention to the plight of the latter group, whose material circumstances were for the most part lamentable.

In the spirit of the *enquête*, GP activists investigated the ethnic composition of the immigrant workers at the mammoth Renault manufacturing plant at Billancourt, on the outskirts of Paris. Among a total of 8,500 immigrant laborers, 4,500 were Moroccans, 2,000 Portuguese, and 800 sub-Saharan Africans (with significant ethnic and tribal differences), in addition to Yugoslavs, Spaniards, and Tunisians. Wide-ranging ethnic and cultural disparities made it extremely difficult to mobilize assembly-line workers as a group, both in the automobile industry and elsewhere.

Two examples will suffice to illustrate the type of “actions” the Maoists favored in the post-May period to catalyze working-class solidarity among these otherwise disparate groupings. In the spring of 1970 GP activists seized on a fare increase in the public transport system to mobilize the largely immigrant workforce at the Renault plant at Billancourt. At the workday’s end hundreds of workers, spurred by the Maoists, occupied the Billancourt metro station, demonstrating against the fare hike and protecting their fellow workers as they jumped the turnstiles in protest. When the police finally materialized, Maoist activists mobilized additional workers. These incidents received widespread press coverage and helped to preserve the spark of proletarian militancy kindled during the May-June uprising.

A similar *enquête* in the provincial town of Meulan uncovered a sizable black market in work permits for foreign workers. The Maoists occupied city hall to protest the scandal and, more generally, to call attention to the sorrowful plight of France’s immigrant workforce. The events in Meulan were soon reported by the mainstream press and proved to be a major source of embarrassment for the Pompidou government. Prime Minister Jean Chaban-Delmas took to the national airwaves, vowing that in two years the nation would be cleared of

slums—a pledge that was never honored. Nevertheless, the Meulan action succeeded in bringing to a halt the illegal trafficking in work permits and helped focus national attention on the woeful lot of the immigrant community.

Another favored Maoist tactic during this period was the sequestration of factory bosses. During these actions, plant managers were locked in their offices for several hours. Sequestrations were viewed as antidotes to worker passivity. In the language of Sartre's social theory, such acts were meant to counter proletarian entropy, or "serialization." One GP activist, evidently well versed in the lexicon of "existential Marxism," offered the following rich phenomenological description of shop-floor alienation:

Everything is arranged so that the workers are stripped of their intelligence. Both the machine and the boss are there to say to the worker: shut up, don't think, it's superfluous and pointless. In thrall to the assembly line and the machine, the worker is intentionally isolated. As an isolated consciousness, he becomes a machine like the others. In this way, he loses all self-awareness. The factory rebellions develop as a way of counteracting this state of alienation. To become self-aware is a way of breaking with this isolation; it's a way of inventing a mode of collective self-expression against the assembly line, against the machine, against the boss.⁴⁴

Factory sequestrations were intended to encourage proletarian self-reliance by demonstrating that the managers were superfluous and that workers could run the factories themselves. These tactics sought to rekindle the spirit of worker self-management, or *autogestion*, one of the May revolt's pivotal political legacies. As wildcat actions, they were intended to be a direct challenge to the authoritarian structure of the French trade unions—above all, the Communist-dominated *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT).

⁴⁴ See the special issue of *Les Temps Modernes*, "Nouveau fascisme, nouvelle démocratie," 42.

In the spring of 1970, French authorities arrested *La Cause du Peuple* editors Jean-Pierre Le Dantec and Michel Le Bris and impounded the newspaper. The last time a newspaper editor had been arrested in France was 1881. A few weeks later, GP spokesperson Alain Geismar was also incarcerated without cause. The government believed that by decapitating the GP leadership, the organization would collapse. But they had severely miscalculated. Thanks to the rash arrests licensed by Marcellin and company, the GP's status would change from that of a handful of unknown militants to a cause célèbre whose plight was passionately embraced by *le tout Paris*.

Simone de Beauvoir and the writer Michel Leiris immediately organized an advocacy group to support the interned Maoists, *Les amis de La Cause du Peuple*. In her memoir of the period, *All Said and Done*, de Beauvoir echoed the attitude of many French intellectuals vis-à-vis the Maoists when she observed:

Despite several reservations—especially, my lack of blind faith in Mao's China—I sympathize with the Maoists. They present themselves as revolutionary socialists, in opposition to the Soviet Union's revisionism and the new bureaucracy created by the Trotskyists; I share their rejection of these approaches. I am not so naive as to believe that they will bring about the revolution in the near future, and I find the "triumphalism" displayed by some of them puerile. But whereas the entirety of the traditional Left accepts the system, defining themselves as a force for renewal or the respectful opposition, the Maoists embody a genuinely radical form of contestation. In a country that has become sclerotic, lethargic, and resigned, they stir things up and arouse public opinion. They try to focus "fresh forces" in the proletariat—youth, women, foreigners, workers in the small provincial factories who are much less under the influence and control of the unions than those in the great industrial centers. They encourage action of a new kind—wildcat strikes and sequestrations—and sometimes they foment it from within. . . . I shall never regret whatever I may have done to help them. I should rather try to help the young

in their struggle than to be the passive witness of a despair that has led some of them to the most hideous suicide.⁴⁵

FROM HISTORICAL TO HYSTERICAL MATERIALISM

In the post-May period the Maoists reveled in the seductions of libidinal politics that had suffused the student-worker uprising. In the fall of 1970 Maoists affiliated with the Vive la révolution! (VLR) group parted ways with the GP to found *Tout!* ("Ce que nous voulons: Tout!" What We Want: Everything!), a biweekly that celebrated the May movement's libertarian spirit. The brain trust behind *Tout!* realized that the May events had gone far in redefining the meaning of "revolution" along "cultural political" lines. The *Tout!* Maoists had imbibed the critique of the vanguard revolutionary model proffered by the Nanterre enraged and Paris Situationists. May's predominant political orientation had been avowedly antiauthoritarian. Why, the breakaway Maoists reasoned, should the critique of authoritarian politics stop at the doorstep of the political Left?

Under the direction of ex-Gauche prolétarienne leader Tiennot Grumbach, the activities of *Tout!* embraced the full range of "alternative" political themes that had crystallized during the post-May period. The "occupation movement" that coincided with the May revolt—factories, offices, schools, and universities—had culminated in the idea of revolution-as-festival. It was this resolutely libertarian political heritage that *Tout!* sought to develop and preserve.

In a spirit of post-May cultural-revolutionary pluralism, the *Tout!* editorial staff opened its pages to new forms and varieties of political contestation. Why, the editors of *Tout!* reasoned, should the "liberation of desire" remain limited and defined by the terms of heterosexual desire? What about the broad range of proscribed and marginalized sexualities? Was *homosexual* desire somehow less valid than *heterosexual* desire? Why challenge the economic and political aspects of bourgeois

⁴⁵ De Beauvoir, *Tout compte fait*, 419.

society while leaving its culture, mores, and predominant social psychological modalities unchallenged? The *Tout!* editorial board expressed these concerns in the following programmatic statement of principle:

Capitalist society has not only colonized and employed to its advantage the productive powers of our bodies and our brains. It has also made off with our desires and our ability to love. It has deported them to a forced labor camp called the family. . . . When I have officially accepted to only love a person of the opposite sex, and one person alone, with the avowed goal of reproducing the species . . . when by virtue of my parental authority I reproduce all the laws of the species in my own children, stressing fear, possessiveness, obedience, competitiveness, and hierarchy, when I timidly surrender my sons and daughters to the school system, to television, and thus to the ideology of the dominant classes, what then remains of my project as a revolutionary? And who benefits? The mechanism that perpetuates the bourgeoisie or the classless society? . . . We are told that by fighting the repression of the body, sexuality, and the mind, capitalist relations of production are allowed to persist; that such battles benefit only a privileged minority and lead only to individual triumphs. . . . But no revolution is accomplished unless it is at the same time a revolution of desire, of sexuality, of our bodies, and if the struggle against economic exploitation consumes all of our energies.⁴⁶

In a series of pathbreaking issues devoted to the question of alternative modes of self-individuation, the *Tout* staff eagerly sought to explore the nature of these alternative practices and themes. The review proved especially receptive to both feminism—as represented by the MLF, or *Mouvement libération des femmes*—and gay rights, as promoted by FHAR, or *Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire*.

For French feminists, 1970 was the year zero. On August 26, the fiftieth anniversary of American women's suffrage, a group of twelve feminists,

⁴⁶ *Tout!* 12 (1970): xx.

having first alerted the press, gathered at the Arc de Triomphe for a demonstration at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Emerging from the local metro station as the television cameras rolled, they unfurled their banners: "One out of every two persons [*hommes*] is a woman." "There's someone more unknown than the soldier: his wife." The twelve were promptly arrested and carted off in police vans. The activists were affiliated with and drew their inspiration from the Maoist *Vive la révolution!* group, a fusion of ex-UJC-ML activists and Nanterre militants. In this way the *Mouvement libération des femmes* was born. This seemingly minor incident had a sensational nationwide impact. Although France was certainly used to demonstrations and protests, it was unaccustomed to protests by feminists who explicitly called attention to women's issues.

That fall the glossy weekly *Elle* tried to organize a "women's estates general" in order to promote a "civilized," that is, nonfeminist, discussion of women's issues. To remain on the safe side, the list of panelists was heavily weighted toward male speakers. The organizers of the meeting had distributed an anodyne questionnaire to gain information about women's tastes and consumption habits. Soon, a group of radical feminists called *Les petites marguerites* arrived to disrupt the event. The *marguerites* distributed their own "alternative" inquiry, featuring questions such as "Do you wear makeup (a) out of self-loathing? (b) to look less like yourself and more like what you are expected to look like?"⁴⁷ Another question was: "Who is best suited to decide the number of children you have?—(a) The pope, who doesn't have any; (b) the president, who's having a hard enough time with his own; (c) the doctor, who values the life of your fetus more than your own life; (d) your husband, who plays with them for a few minutes each day when he returns from work; (e) you, who carry, bear, and raise them."⁴⁸

But the event that went farthest toward raising awareness about feminist issues was the manifesto of the 343 women who had undergone illegal abortions. Entitled "Our Wombs Belong to Us!" the manifesto appeared in the April 5, 1971, issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Among

⁴⁷ Cited in Duchén's *Feminism in France*, 10.

⁴⁸ Cited in Picq's *Libération des femmes*, 22.

the signatories were Simone de Beauvoir, Catherine Deneuve, Marguerite Duras, Violette Leduc, and Jeanne Moreau.

De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was a milestone in the development of modern feminist consciousness. She made short shrift of biological determinism, famously declaring, in a ringing affirmation of existential subjectivity: "One is not born a woman, one becomes one." Yet, by the time the MLF burst onto the scene circa 1970, her brand of egalitarian feminism seemed tame and outdated. Although she never personally had an abortion, rumor suggested that on occasion she allowed them to be performed in her apartment.

The manifesto of the 343 began: "One million women undergo abortions each year in France. They do this under dangerous conditions, owing to the clandestine circumstances to which they are condemned, although this operation, when practiced under medical supervision, is one of the simplest. One passes over the fate of these one million women in silence."⁴⁹ At the time, abortion remained illegal in France, which, since World War I, had been obsessed by a stagnating birthrate. According to the French penal code, abortion was an offense punishable by six months to three years in prison. Contraception had been legalized in 1967, the year the so-called *loi Neuwirth* was passed. Until then, medical personnel who provided information about contraception were subject to prosecution.

French feminism's emergence was a heady and confusing time. In France it was the high point of *gauchisme*. Male leftists feared that by independently pursuing women's issues, feminists would detract from the larger stakes of the class struggle. French feminists themselves displayed multiple political loyalties. Many had begun as left-wing activists and were uncertain as to how they might reconcile their Marxist commitments with their newly acquired feminist convictions. Some solved the problem by simply declaring that men were bourgeois and women were proletarian. Since so many male militants remained uncomprehending, not to mention manifestly unsympathetic, *vis-à-vis* their motivations and aims, MLF activists decided early on to exclude men from

⁴⁹ *Le Nouvel Observateur*, April 5, 1971, 42.

their meetings. "Since when must the oppressed demand from their oppressors permission to revolt?" they inquired rhetorically.⁵⁰

Whereas mainstream feminists pursued rights-oriented issues—better child care, equal pay, abortion rights—MLF activists viewed feminism as a vehicle for reexamining fundamental questions concerning women's identity—that is, as a key to qualitatively transforming womanhood and femininity in their entirety. In an unsubtle rejection of bourgeois-egalitarian feminism, their slogan became "Down with Mommy's feminism!" Traditional feminism had sought to integrate women within society. The MLF, in keeping with the spirit of the times, sought to "disaggregate" society along with its predominant practices, values, and mores.

One commentator has described the mood of the times in the following terms:

At these meetings, chaos and good humor rather than clarity and order prevailed. . . . At MLF meetings nobody knew quite what was going on. This unstructured format, a reaction against the rigid procedures of male-dominated political meetings, met with mixed response. Some women found it invigorating, others found it irritating. One woman wrote bluntly that "every time I went to a general assembly, I wondered what I was doing there." But another wrote: "it was magnificent, invigorating. You didn't know what was going on, you couldn't really see anything . . . but still there was a liveliness, a joy, that I had never seen anywhere else."⁵¹

The MLF creatively disrupted an otherwise staid French society. As a result, deeply ingrained patriarchal habitudes and assumptions quickly lost their self-evidence. Traditional mores were challenged by a new set of feminist terms and concepts. The Gazolines were an omnipresent clique of boisterous transvestites. Another group that attained media prominence was the Gouines rouges, or Red Dykes, who flaunted their flamboyance during the 1971 May Day parade. One of the leading

⁵⁰ Cited in Picq's *Libération des femmes*, 15.

⁵¹ Duchén, *Feminism in France*, 9.

feminist publications was called *Le Torchon Brûlé!* (The Rag Burns!). Its subtitle, *Un Journal Menstruel*, was a play on “mensuel,” the French word for “monthly.” Inspired by the credo of Maoist populism, *Le Torchon Brûlé!* was an offshoot of the Vive la révolution! group. As one member explained: “There was no desire to produce polished journalism, but instead to avoid the division between those who can and those who cannot read and to encourage women to write whether they thought they could or not.”⁵² Heated ideological debates raged over whether motherhood was a negation of women’s autonomy, as Simone de Beauvoir had intimated in *The Second Sex*, or a woman’s ultimate fulfillment, as certain strains of “difference” feminism would soon claim.

By the same token, by pursuing an independent agenda the MLF created an irreparable breach in the heart of leftism and thereby contributed to gauchisme’s demise. Taking the claim that “the personal is the political” to new extremes, the MLF often flirted with an unhealthy, sectarian narcissism. As Christine Delphy, one of the movement’s leading theorists, claimed in the pages of *Le Temps des Femmes*: “We have no desire to fight for our neighbor, be it a man or a woman. Militants used to spend their time fighting on behalf of others such as workers or immigrants. We speak about *ourselves*.”⁵³ Soon, not only would the MLF refuse to collaborate with male comrades, it would also refuse to ally itself with rival feminist groups. Such developments were merely one more indication of how difficult it would be to maintain the fragile post-May coalition of left-wing causes and political groupings.

MLF politics had become avowedly anti-intellectual. A “politics of feeling”—“thinking with one’s gut”—triumphed over a “politics of the intellect,” now denigrated as “masculinist” and “phallogocentric.” The net result was that, paradoxically, the MLF’s focus took on a distinctly nonpolitical cast. The outside world ceased to count. In their discussions, militants seemed unable to transcend the parameters of their own group dynamics and personal feelings. As one observer has noted, “Politics was reduced in value, dissolving in the unlimited expression

⁵² Ibid., 10.

⁵³ Delphy, “Je ne vois pas pourquoi un mouvement s’arrêtait de grandir,” *Le Temps des Femmes* 12 (Summer 1981).

of women's individual and relational problems—or, more precisely, those of specific MLF members.”⁵⁴ In this way, the MLF consummated the transition from “historical” to “hysterical” materialism.

STONEWALL IN PARIS

The gay rights or homosexual liberation movement encompassed both men and women. Gay men openly attended the first MLF meetings to share their problems and concerns. Only later would their respective paths diverge.

At the forefront of the struggle for homosexual rights was the Maoist organ *Tout!* A groundbreaking issue published in April 1971 featured a woman's backside on its cover. In keeping with the irreverent spirit of the times, it proclaimed: “There's plenty of ass for everyone.” Following in the footsteps of the surrealists, as well as the American yippies, both the MLF and the Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire (FHAR) employed to maximum effect the strategy of deliberate provocation to call attention to their cause. The writings and actions of Guy Hocquenghem, author of the pioneering manifesto *Homosexual Desire*, are a perfect case in point. In the April 1971 issue of *Tout!* Hocquenghem's contribution, “Manifesto of 343 Fags Who Admit to Having Been Bugged by Arabs” (an unsubtle allusion to the celebrated “abortion” issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur*), reverberated throughout the hexagon.

Using the pages of *Tout!* as a sounding board, FHAR militants actively called into question inherited conceptions of bourgeois sexual normalcy: “What you identify as ‘normal’ is, for us, a source of oppression. All normality harasses us [*nous hérisse*]—even ideals of revolutionary normalcy.”⁵⁵ FHAR activists proceeded to carry this argument a step farther, celebrating the superiority of “homosexual desire.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Le Goff, *Mai 68*, 310.

⁵⁵ “Les pédés de la révolution,” *Tout!* 12 (April 23, 1971).

⁵⁶ See Hocquenghem's classic manifesto *Homosexual Desire*. My account of FHAR is indebted to Haas's formulations in “Death of the Angel.”

Heterosexuals, they claimed, had denatured their own polymorphous libidinal potential by arbitrarily limiting the range of their sexual options and practices. If as a political radical one strove to systematically challenge received notions of behavioral normalcy, then why not call heterosexuality into question as well? After all, did not homosexual desire creatively undermine a panoply of bourgeois “family values,” the nuclear family, patriarchy, monogamy, virility, and so forth? Sodomy was revolutionary, FHAR activists contended, insofar as it violated a series of bourgeois moral conventions and taboos.⁵⁷ Or, as Hocquenghem expressed this thought with characteristic bravado, “Our assholes are revolutionary!”⁵⁸

The homosexual liberation issue of *Tout!* was a resounding success. Observers noted that at last French homosexuals had experienced their own May 1968. Several spin-off publications resulted, including the journal *Le Fléau Sociale* (The Social Plague), an appropriation of an affront commonly directed against homosexual practices. The *Tout!* articles, along with several additions, were collected and republished in a popular anthology, *Rapport Contre la Normalité* (Report against Normalcy).⁵⁹ The Pompidou government impounded ten thousand copies of the twelfth issue of *Tout!*—about one-fifth of the total print run—on the grounds of obscenity, generating further publicity. *Tout!*'s titular director, Jean-Paul Sartre, was indicted for “outrage against public morals,” although the charges were later rescinded. Many leftist bookstores refused to stock the issue, widening the rift at the heart of the gauchiste community over the centrality and import of “cultural politics.” Both the Trotskyists and the Communists dismissed all matters pertaining to sexual emancipation as a retrograde, petty bourgeois distraction.

Thereafter, gays throughout France began to feel comfortable discussing questions concerning their sexuality. It was as though, following the special issue of *Tout!*, an immense weight had been lifted from their shoulders. A new homosexual assertiveness was immediately discernible.

⁵⁷ See “Les pédés de la révolution.”

⁵⁸ Cited in Martel's *The Pink and the Black*, 17.

⁵⁹ *Rapport contre la normalité* (Paris: Editions Champs Libre, 1971).

At the next meeting of FHAR, several hundred homosexual militants were in attendance as opposed to the usual several dozen. One prominent activist described a typical FHAR meeting at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts as follows:

In 1971, the general meetings of the FHAR at the Beaux-Arts became a place for immediate sexual gratification. Militants put revolution into practice: they invented cruising relieved of its furtiveness, and, moving through hallways, surrounded by sculptures, or on the upper floors and in the attic, they experimented with [Charles] Fourier's 36,000 forms of love. . . . The general meetings, an early incarnation of the back rooms designed for quick, anonymous sex that were to spread throughout France in the late 1970s, replaced the Tuileries. . . . In Hocquenghem's words, the FHAR became a "nebula of feelings."⁶⁰

In January 1972 another milestone in the history of gay liberation occurred on the occasion of Hocquenghem's celebrated "coming out" essay, "La révolution des homosexuels," in the mass circulation weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur*. During the 1960s Hocquenghem had traversed the entire spectrum of radical political engagement, starting off as a Communist, then joining the Trotskyists, before ultimately casting his lot, like so many leftists, with the Maoists and *Vive la révolution!* One commentator has aptly described Hocquenghem's *Nouvel Observateur* article as "a homosexual version of General de Gaulle's appeal of June 18, 1940."⁶¹ Hocquenghem painstakingly recounted his travails as a closeted youth—the unbearable confusion and manifold humiliations—until his "liberation" thanks to the sympathy and patience of a philosophy professor he encountered at Lycée Henri IV. As Hocquenghem movingly reflects, "Each one of us is mutilated in an aspect of our life that we know is essential, that which we call sexual desire or love."⁶²

⁶⁰ Martel, *The Pink and the Black*, 26.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶² Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*.

In 1972 the ubiquitous Hocquenghem, who died of AIDS in 1988, published *Homosexual Desire*, the manifesto that single-handedly launched the queer studies movement.

Both the women's movement and FHAR were part of a widespread, post-May cultural current known as the liberation of desire. Taking their cues from the theories of Herbert Marcuse, Wilhelm Reich, and the antipsychiatry movement, activists initiated a sweeping critique of bourgeois normalcy. They sought to show that issues of sexuality had an important *political* dimension that transcended individual considerations of sexual preference. As one FHAR pamphlet contended, "We homosexuals are oppressed by the domination of imperialism. Our liberation, like that of all oppressed people, is part of a larger political struggle against every form of domination: ideological domination; the domination of women; sexual and racial domination."⁶³

Was homosexual desire less acceptable than heterosexual desire? Was the nuclear family, which Freud had exposed as a breeding ground of neurosis and which feminists excoriated as a hotbed of patriarchy, a more desirable model than various alternative living arrangements? Was there a direct relationship between the self-renunciation that bourgeois civilization demanded and the repression of desire, with all of its negative consequences for character formation and personality structure? By posing such questions, FHAR militants initiated a wide-ranging critique of "phallogracy": the tyranny of heterosexual normalcy.

In the end both the MLF and FHAR were remarkably successful in gaining widespread public recognition of their basic cultural claims. As sociologist Henri Mendras has observed, what began as "a revolt of homosexuals led to a rapid and complete reversal of the majority of French people's attitudes toward homosexuality, and, consequently, toward the differences of the Other."⁶⁴ Ironically, both the MLF and FHAR imploded once they had succeeded in obtaining broad cultural acceptance of the right to be different.

Yet, the change of focus from "revolutionary politics" to "cultural politics" carried certain risks. Although the ultimate political value of

⁶³ FHAR, Tract 1, Bibliothèque nationale de France, 4 WZ 10828 (1972).

⁶⁴ Mendras, *Français*, 122.

feminism, gay liberation, and the various alternative movements remained unquestionable, the *Tout!* editors soon realized that their organ threatened to become a journal of “lifestyle” studies. As the May movement receded from view, “movement politics” increasingly risked sliding imperceptibly into “lifestyle politics.” The preoccupation with consciousness-raising and group identity was necessary and legitimate, as were the various groups’ demands for social recognition. By the same token, as they began pursuing their separate and often irreconcilable conceptions of emancipation, one began to wonder: what exactly were the values they held in common? If every oppressed group must speak for itself and only for itself, because only it can analyze its own suffering and decide the proper course of action, is there anyone left to speak for the oppressed as a whole?

Among feminists a bitter rift soon developed between rights-oriented feminism, “difference” feminism (stressing women’s specificity or particularity), and lesbian separatists, who believed that all contact with men should be studiously avoided. French feminism’s inner divisions seemed paradigmatic of a general fragmentation besetting post-May social movements and of the attendant risks of ghettoization. Would the temptations of political inwardness—the seductions of navel-gazing and groupthink—ultimately outweigh the demands of active social contestation? At stake was a delicate balance that in many respects was never satisfactorily resolved. Conversely, more optimistic interpreters of the May movement’s legacy viewed this oscillation between public and private as a fruitful tension.

“SEVEN YEARS OF HAPPINESS!”

In part, the new social movements that flourished in the post-May years were victims of their own success. In many instances the grassroots pressures they exerted on the political system were cannily effective in forcing the French government’s hand. This strategic shift from an inward-looking cultural politics to an outwardly directed focus on legislation and civil liberties was part of a general trend. The change in focus was true not just for gays, but for many other groups—Jews,

immigrants, and feminists—as well. Thus, “after a period of identity politics—centripetal, introverted, and introspective—the discourse evolved and militants turned to defending the rights of the minority group in a quasi-unionist, centrifugal movement.”⁶⁵

In 1975, the year after the liberal-centrist Valéry Giscard d’Estaing was elected to office, the so-called *loi Veil* was passed (after Minister of Health Simone Veil), legalizing abortion in most circumstances, despite vigorous opposition from the Catholic Church and the parliamentary Right. Once abortion became licit, the pressures to fully legalize contraception followed suit. It stood to reason that the more liberally contraception was employed, the fewer abortions would take place. Thus, as part of the *loi Veil*—and reflecting a widespread transformation of societal attitudes and mores—contraception was at last made generally available. Moreover, the costs were fully reimbursed by the national health care system. The *loi Veil*’s passage was widely perceived as a triumph of Enlightenment values against the forces of reaction: the Enlightenment over tradition, republicanism over monarchy, freethinking over Catholicism.⁶⁶ In sum, it was a triumph for the values of *laïcité*, or secularism.

In the lead-up to the 1981 presidential election, Socialist candidate François Mitterrand distinguished himself as a forceful advocate of homosexual rights. In an April 1981 round-table discussion with feminist activists, the Socialist Party (PS) standard-bearer brusquely declared: “Homosexuality must cease to be a criminal offense. The choice of each person must be respected, that’s all, but within a normal framework of relations between men and women, or between men, or between women. . . . But no discrimination because of the nature of one’s morals; for me, that goes without saying.”⁶⁷ Thereby, Mitterrand and his fellow Socialists demonstrated a level of tolerance far superior to that of their left-wing rivals, the Communists and the Trotskyists.

Little wonder, then, that homosexuals flocked to support the Mitterrand campaign in droves. On April 4, 1981, ten thousand gays took

⁶⁵ Martel, *The Pink and the Black*, 127–28.

⁶⁶ Picq, *Années-mouvement*, 171.

⁶⁷ Choisir, *Quel président pour les femmes?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 98.

to the streets of the Latin Quarter to demonstrate in support of his candidacy. After all, the Socialist Party had openly embraced the cultural revolutionary slogan "Change Life!" (*Changez la vie!*) as an integral part of its 1971 Epinay Program, the reconstituted PS's statement of principles. Some observers believe that, in what proved to be an extremely close election, the homosexual vote may have tipped the balance in the Socialists' favor. The gay community hailed Mitterrand's election as an event akin to the Second Coming. The headline of the popular gay weekly *Gai Pied* effused: "Seven Years of Happiness!"

Once in office, the Socialists, who had obtained a solid majority in the June 1981 legislative elections, demonstrated the courage of their convictions. At the instigation of the Mitterrand cabinet, PS deputies proceeded to reverse a wide range of discriminatory laws and regulations. Interior Minister Gaston Defferre circulated a memo ordering the police to dispense with humiliating identity checks in the areas surrounding gay bars and clubs. The vice-squad unit overseeing homosexual activity was promptly disbanded. Those who had been arrested for "homosexual crimes" were amnestied. An antigay clause renters utilized, specifying that tenants must be "good family men," was struck down.

But the major challenge lay in reversing a Vichy ordinance criminalizing homosexual activity prior to the age of twenty-one (during the 1960s the age had been reduced to eighteen), even though the age of consent for heterosexuals was fifteen. After a series of prolonged and heated debates, the law was finally overturned in July 1982, thanks to the perseverance of Minister of Justice Robert Badinter and the legal acumen of the feminist attorney Gisèle Halimi, who served as the administration's chief counsel.

The irony was that both the feminist and the homosexual liberation movements proved so successful politically that they ultimately rendered themselves superfluous as movements. Thus, as both groups increasingly gained broad social acceptance, and as their basic legal and constitutional agendas were met, they were deprived of their original *raison d'être*. So great was the flush of enthusiasm in the aftermath of the Left's stunning 1981 electoral victory that many activists abandoned society for politics, assuming advisory posts in the new Socialist government. Therefore the 1980s paradoxically represented the ebb

tide of social movements in France.⁶⁸ With the Socialists in power, a range of conventional and familiar political options—standing for office, promulgating legislation, constitutional reform—that had been foreclosed under the Gaullists seemed to open up again. Consequently, with the Socialist victory, the ethos of left-wing militancy that had flourished in the post-May period under libertarian-Maoist auspices paradoxically receded.

⁶⁸ See the excellent account in Waters's *Social Movements in France*.