

# Alain Badiou and the Multiple Meanings of the “Cultural Revolution”

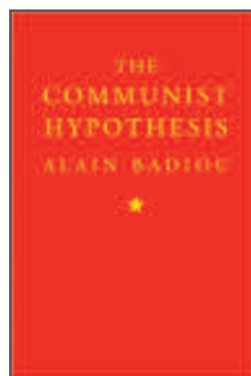
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**ABSTRACT:** Alain Badiou's work *L'Hypothèse communiste* (The Communist hypothesis) presents the “Cultural Revolution” in China as a necessary and commendable stage on the way towards the realisation of the Communist ideal. Badiou's analysis of this event completely neglects what really happened to the Chinese during this period and shows a curious willingness on the part of the author to take literally the discourses produced by the official propaganda of the day.

**KEYWORDS:** Cultural Revolution, Badiou.



**Alain Badiou,**  
*L'Hypothèse communiste*  
(The Communist hypothesis),  
Paris, Nouvelles Éditions Lignes, 2009,  
192 pp.



**Alain Badiou,**  
*The Communist hypothesis,*  
translated by David Macey and  
Steve Corcoran,  
New York, Verso, 2010, 288 pp.

In 1966, a massive event erupted in China under the name of the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.” To this day, even with the benefit of a half-century of hindsight, there is still no consensus on how to interpret this profound upheaval in modern Chinese history. Moreover, in recent years we have seen some surprising opinions being expressed that cannot be characterised as mere misunderstandings. The most unexpected development in this regard is the way in which a philosopher, Alain Badiou, has used this “revolution” to serve a certain theoretical construction in his (2009) work *L'Hypothèse communiste*.<sup>(1)</sup> In fact, his views on the subject could show us the limits, if any exist for him, of interpreting a discourse fabricated and propagated around a historical event that had, after all, a substantial reality made up of the lives of hundreds of millions of people.

The historical conjuncture of the publication of Badiou's work facilitated its quite extensive dissemination, and it was soon translated into English.<sup>(2)</sup> Indeed, the world had just gone through a serious financial crisis, and all kinds of experts proposed explanations and solutions for the crisis to anyone willing to listen. Against this cacophony, the voice of Badiou had at least the merit of being clear and unequivocal: the capitalist system had once again showed its fatal flaws and we must, even if only rhetorically, prepare ourselves for a new Communist adventure.

My aim here is not to examine Badiou's arguments or his deeply entrenched judgements of the historical events and characters that are described in this work. After all, the author himself invites his readers to see his book not as a political analysis of world affairs – although he does devote the major part of it to a highly political account of history, both recent and from the past – but rather as a philosophical treatise. He has the need to specify this because his attempt to rehabilitate, inter alia, the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” is mainly carried out on a conceptual plane. What strikes us most in reading his account of this event from 50 years ago is the fact that, unlike other studies of this sinister “revolution” in China, Badiou has taken very seriously, and even literally, the words and slogans that were prepared and released by the propaganda machine of the time and translated (in this case into French) by the Party's official translation bureau. The translation is often clumsy and always devoid of the contextual connotations of the original. The originality of Badiou's approach lies in a radical conceptualism that neglects all the particular facts and circumstances while

1. Alain Badiou, *L'Hypothèse communiste* (The Communist hypothesis), Paris, Nouvelles Éditions Lignes, 2009, 192 pp.
2. Alain Badiou, *The Communist hypothesis*, translated by David Macey and Steve Corcoran, New York, Verso, 2010, 288 pp.

seeking to establish a truth, a revolutionary truth in its purest form, through a transcendent and binary universalist vision; for universality is, as the author states at the outset of his argument, the real attribute of the whole corpus of truth.<sup>(3)</sup> What he strives to impart to his readers is exactly the corpus of the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" – and here we follow Badiou's own preferred usage by quoting *in extenso* the official name of this movement, even if the most pious and nostalgic of China's old guard no longer refer to it in this pompous way. In reading Badiou, one could come to believe that this very event is merely a corpus, made up of proper names, common names, adjectives, and predicates to which, in the preamble to his book, Badiou gives varying significances depending on their respective relation to the Idea of the Revolution. These names and predicates become, in the eyes of the philosopher, all that this "revolution" produced, both for its contemporaries and for posterity. The corpus is no longer a screen through which one might hope to perceive a life, a reality, a specific practice so as to create a relation between words and things, but rather a matter exclusively for the reflections of the historian-philosopher. It is true that in the chapter about this period of contemporary Chinese history, we are treated to an account of people, dates, documents, and conflicts, but the identities and fates of these actors, faceless and without personality, serve only as illustrations of the Idea, in capital letters, of Revolution on the move, which, in its conceptual purity, is alone worthy of philosophical attention. What are the components of this Idea? As a good Communist, as Badiou calls himself, but not as a good Marxist, he does not deign to know in what economic, social, and human circumstances the corpus of the "Chinese Cultural Revolution" was manufactured and propagated, nor what its impact was on the daily lives of the Chinese people. Yet between the end of the "Cultural Revolution" in 1976 and the publication of Badiou's book, abundant documentation had already come into existence bearing witness to what the Chinese people had experienced during those years. One could read, for example, *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution*, by Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao (Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), *Ten Years of Madness: Oral Histories of China's Cultural Revolution*, by Feng Jicai (San Francisco, China Books and Periodicals Inc., 1996), *Mao's Last Revolution*, by Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals (Cambridge, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), to name only the most easily accessible works. In a more personal frame, there are the two books of family memoirs: *Wild Swans*, by Jung Chang (London, Simon and Schuster, 1991) and *Life and Death in Shanghai*, by Nien Cheng (New York, Grove Press, 1987), which show us in a very poignant manner the devastation suffered by two families from very different sociological backgrounds. In addition to these texts already translated into main European languages, publications in Chinese constitute an endless source for anyone with a mind to find the historical truth. In the face of historical truths that are well established by these direct testimonies, the question must be asked whether it is permissible to avoid the work of the historian and content oneself only with a conceptual approach.

Other issues emerge in this connection. In transcultural communication and the transfer of ideas between two radically different worlds, could travelling concepts still manage to retain a minimal substance so as to be understood, used, and discussed in a concordant way? Or can one rely entirely on supposed universals conveyed by words, even if they are put into circulation in circumstances that are fundamentally different? Does one have an intellectual and moral duty to be conscious of the great distance, or even perhaps the unfathomable gulf, between China and the West when one re-

ceives a term from the other side that bears a seemingly graspable concept?

One example among numerous others: in a wide-angled view of history the author saw that, at the time when Chinese youth was being mobilised by its great leader in what he labelled a "revolt," French youth were going into the streets to take part in what is called the "May 68" movement. The conceptualising instinct went into action, as if automatically, and he was convinced that it was the same worldwide movement, that of the revolutionary revolt of youth, raging in both the West and the East against the system of power in place. These were the red years in world history, as it has been affirmed over and over. What is true is that those who participated in the movements in China and Paris were roughly of the same age. But the similarity ends there. In Paris, the young students called for unrestrained freedom. Their slogan was, "It is forbidden to forbid." In China, unconditional obedience to the supreme leader was the first condition for survival: "We are all the little sunflowers always turning towards the red sun that is President Mao" was the refrain of the so-called "red rebels" in China. Does "revolution," a word made hackneyed by the media, designate something comparable across the two continents or, for that matter, does it really evoke a universal concept that knows, as Badiou tells us, fragments of reality?<sup>(4)</sup> We may decide to give the name of "revolution" both to the great political movements in China beginning in 1966 and to the student demonstrations in the Latin Quarter in May 1968, but this same word in no way guarantees the legitimacy of placing the two events, French and Chinese, side by side.

The relentless taking up of a term could well make us forget where and how it originated. The "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" was the name that the propaganda machine of the Chinese Party thought up in order to mobilise young people who were, right from early childhood, nourished on tales of revolutionary heroism. But should one acquiesce to such glorification now that we have better knowledge of what really happened during this movement? As Alain Peyrefitte once rightly observed in a radio interview, in this official term for the event it is only the adjective "great" that is justified, as it was not a revolution, it was anti-culture, and it was not in the interest of the proletariat. It is to be observed that Badiou, so mistrustful of everything written in the Western press, which he regards as completely engaged in propaganda, seems to forget that the discourses of the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" that he embraces whole-heartedly were all products of propaganda and designated as such by those who devised them.

One might retort that there is propaganda and propaganda; the fact that a discourse is produced by the professional propagandists does not mean that we cannot find a good concept in it. Probably so. But what accounts for the fact that a concept might qualify as a good one in the first place? Unfortunately, we could not put these "revolutionary" concepts to the test in a simple way: wanting to look for their truth conditions would be the trap of vulgar positivism; wanting to decide on their acceptability by measuring their impact on the well-being of the greatest number would be the naive illusion of utilitarianism. In contrast, Badiou prefers to glide into a rarefied, and nobler, atmosphere. The reasoning that seems to underpin his argument calculates the weightiness of concepts based on the equations of ideas with, as a final solution, the Communist hypothesis at the end of the road. However, one cannot avoid the observation that during those red years in China the concepts "capitalist," "communist," "revolutionary," "reac-

3. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

4. *Idem.*

tionary,” etc. were all heavily laden with values, but light on meaning. They were heavy because they were driven by almost transcendental values closely linked to a relentless struggle for power in the context of a political reality that had the bad habit of being rebellious to well-defined concepts; light, because their referents changed from one day to the next following a simple stroke of the pen by the great leader. We know that during this “revolution” people were not condemned for being reactionary, but rather were reactionary because they were condemned.

Read at the other end of the world, in the Latin Quarter in Paris to be precise, these words of the “Great Revolution” fascinated, as they still do, by their exotic strangeness and their fantastic fecundity – “unprecedented texts,”<sup>(5)</sup> as Badiou puts it. But in their country of origin they were signifiers of a reality that still weighs tragically in our collective and personal memory. One might wonder what would have happened to the philosophy teacher Badiou had he found himself, by an accident of time and space, in Beijing from 1966 to 1968, during that period that seems to have given him so much inspiration. The unpleasant consequence would be that he would necessarily have been a privileged target of popular struggle, meaning bluntly: public humiliation and violent attacks without any recourse to justice or possible police protection. Gangs of Red Guards could have at any moment invaded his home and smashed everything in it. All his books, from Plato to Lacan, from Mallarmé to Becket, would have been thrown into the fire. This scenario is not pure fantasy; one only has to read a book based on archives, *Wu Mi yu Chen Yingke* by Wu Xuezhao (Beijing, Sanlian Shudian, new edition 2014), to realise the fate reserved for all Chinese intellectuals during those dark years. And these same “Red Guards,” a fearsome instrument of this barbarous and massive persecution, were also soon to become, once they had served their purpose, a target of repression. Would our writer’s perception have changed had he had personal, physical contact with the concrete context from which these fine words of the Revolution came? Perhaps. But Badiou would probably respond that the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, like all revolutions, had its own way of unfolding. In any event, the Little Red Book was enough for him. But does one really have the right to erase in a single stroke the terrible suffering of tens of millions and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent people as “insignificant” in the name of these fine revolutionary concepts? By what logic can one judge “without interest”<sup>(6)</sup> these bloody histories of unconscionable and senseless mass persecution that are now accessible in memoirs, personal accounts, archives, and academic works?<sup>(7)</sup> We must not think, as Badiou would have us believe,<sup>(8)</sup> that all these sad memories of the “Great Cultural Revolution” are the work of official revanchist propaganda concerning this fine revolution. For one thing, most, if not all, of the accounts, memoirs, and studies have been published unofficially; for another, their distribution in China is still not easy. These authors persist in recalling their past sufferings with the sense of performing an honest duty of memory.

In a public letter to Žižek in an Appendix to the book, Badiou takes on the defence of Mao Zedong by pointing out that, unlike Stalin, Mao did not execute his political enemies, who for the most part, although imprisoned for many years, remained alive and resumed their careers after his own death. This is largely true. But the number of deaths in China under Mao was not lower at all, either proportionally or in absolute terms. It is only that in this case it was the “people,” anonymous, without a voice, without a title, without visibility in the media, who were dying – dying of hunger, under the reign of blows, in summary executions, through lack of medical care, or during those civil wars between the Red Guards and the “rebels.” Does the obscurity of the

humble victims without media attention make the act of their death any more humane? Does all this destruction of human life have a meaning? Apparently not for Badiou, as he does not like to count bodies. Still in his letter to Žižek, he asks his friend to pay no attention to such “anecdotes.”<sup>(9)</sup> What matters for him is that out of this murderous chaos there emerged “the ideas, the slogans, the organisational forms and the theoretical patterns whose force is inexhaustible.”<sup>(10)</sup> Alongside this great formidable set of words, the suffering of millions is a mere detail of history.

Badiou’s pamphlet begins with a subtle dialectical exercise on the concept of failure. Very curiously, and perhaps also ingeniously, he compares the communist hypothesis to a mathematical one, the famous Fermat hypothesis. From the time of its formulation by the great seventeenth century mathematician from Toulouse, generations of mathematicians tried, unsuccessfully, to prove it, but it was not until 1994 that the Englishman Wiles finally found the right solution. Obviously, we cannot, says Badiou, consider all those previous attempts as failures to be forgotten, for they were necessary steps to take before arriving at the final goal. Similarly, the communist hypothesis should take the same road to the end. Thus, according to Badiou, the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” constituted an honourable and worthy stage towards the realisation of that hypothesis. It was therefore not a failure, or at least not a failure in any negative sense. We should continue to try again, to encounter failure after failure, so that one day this glorious Idea may triumph.<sup>(11)</sup>

That Badiou is keen to merge his twin passions is his right. But, for those of us who cannot ignore the real things behind the words, there is a significant difference between a mathematical hypothesis and a political and social one. When one fails again and again in one’s calculations in trying to find a mathematical solution, all that one sacrifices is paper and ink. But when one fails in a mass movement, especially a violent movement like that of the Great Revolution under discussion here, what one sacrifices is blood and human lives.

During the years of the “Cultural Revolution,” concepts travelled very quickly from China to France via the role played by the propaganda machine. But quite obviously when one caught them on the fly they had quite a different weight depending on whether one was in the leafy courtyard of the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris or in the “cattle stables” of China, those wild prisons set up in almost all work units across this vast country.

Simon Leys, the greatest China specialist of our time, made the following judgement of Badiou’s position: “It is not even possible to say that it is stupid (which itself would suppose a certain content that could elicit comment): it is simply opaque about NOTHING.” But it is precisely this NOTHING that served Badiou’s exceptional exercise, as in the end this Nothing offers him a very convenient space for discourse. He presents the “Proletarian Cultural Revolution” in China as “an authentically revolutionary form” for the “unfolding of the politics of emancipation” towards universal equality. Did he never notice, however, he who shows such familiarity with, and affection for, the official propaganda line of the time, that the key words “freedom” and “equality”

5. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 264.

7. See, among many others, Andrew G. Walder and Yang Su, “The Cultural Revolution in the Countryside: Scope, Timing, and Human Impact,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 173, 2003, pp. 74–99.

8. Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, op. cit., pp. 105 and 265.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 264.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 276.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

never had any place in the revolutionary slogans, nor were they linked with any positive connotation in Maoist discourse? Indeed, one may wonder whether this was ever important for him. Apparently not, as Badiou would defend his view of the Cultural Revolution with his own ideas on the relations between meaning and truth. We see here, it seems to me, the reason that Badiou could evoke in order to refuse to give meaning to all those tragic facts during this ten-year disaster in China. I am thinking particularly of the death of Lu Enghong, the conductor of the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, the centenary of whose birth has just been celebrated. Lu was imprisoned, tortured, and executed in the early months of the Cultural Revolution, his only crime having been to express his disagreement with a Party document entitled "The 16-point decision," a document regarded as extremely significant by Badiou, and on which he spends much time commenting point-by-point in his book *L'Hypothèse communiste*. We have also to realise that Lu's murder was in reality only one case among hundreds of thousands during a period that Badiou deems to be one of "the most extensive creative freedom."<sup>12</sup>

We could, of course, be completely mistaken in our approach by trying to locate the foundation of Badiou's thinking on the Chinese Cultural Revolution in his philosophical beliefs. Perhaps this should rather be sought in the realm of his personal lived experience. This is, moreover, what he has said rather clearly himself in addressing the question of why one should still invoke the "Cultural Revolution." Badiou explains that it is because it was and remains a constant and living point of reference for a whole movement of political activism of which he has been a part. Fifty years on, he simply wants to insist, no matter what, that he has never been wrong.

■ Translated by Peter Brown.

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12. Alain Badiou, *L'Hypothèse communiste* (The Communist Hypothesis), *op. cit.*, p. 107.