

# Egalitarian Inventions and Political Symptoms: A Reassessment of Mao's Statements on the "Probable Defeat"

Alessandro Russo

## Abstract:

In the last two decades of Maoism, the search for new perspectives of egalitarian politics generated unbridgeable discontinuities within the "political episteme" of the socialist states of the time, which appeared "symptomatically" in a series of statements of Mao converging on the issue of the "probable defeat". A defeat that concerned both the results of the Cultural Revolution and the destinies of the socialist states. However, far from expressing capitulationism, Mao's statements were strong appeals to political mobilization. In earlier essays, the author had examined those statements as a path for reassessing the heterogeneity of the Cultural Revolution with respect to the overall destinies of the Communist parties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The reflection on Stalinism promoted by *Crisis & Critique* is the occasion for reassessing Mao's positions in a larger context.

## Keywords:

Mao Zedong, Probable Defeat, Symptomatic Reading, Maoism and Stalinism, Cultural Revolution

In earlier essays, I have suggested that a resolute attitude of Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution is to be found in a series of statements which converge upon an enigmatic theme: the "probable defeat" 可能失败. The Cultural Revolution was indispensable and urgent for Mao but it would 'probably' end up in "defeat".<sup>1</sup> Since in these statements I have looked for a path for reassessing the heterogeneity of the Cultural Revolution with respect to the overall destinies of the Communist parties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I would like to take the occasion of this special issue on Stalin and Stalinism for reexamining Mao's positions in a larger context.

## Maoism and Stalinism

Relations between Maoism and Stalinism comprise vast sets of entangled issues, which cover ultimately the entire horizon of the modern revolutionary politics. After the closure of this horizon such a relation has become inaccessible without rethinking thoroughly pertinent theoretical perspectives. Confining myself to outline a theoretical path, I start with the attitudes of Mao and Stalin towards materialism, specifying that their philosophical differences cannot but be 'under condition' of the respective orientations in politics.

On the wake of the incisive argument as raised by Frank Ruda<sup>2</sup>

1 Russo 1998, 2006.

2 Ruda 2015.

regarding the value of the materialism, I suggest that Mao's philosophical attitude points towards a 'materialism of the exception.' Conversely, Stalin aims to "regularise" materialism. In *Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism*,<sup>3</sup> Stalin makes the materialism not only the name of the general space of knowledge, but also a structural principle of the governmental circumstances in Socialism. It is the worldview of the party-state.<sup>4</sup> In this sense Lacan might argue that the Soviet Union was the "triumph of the university discourse".<sup>5</sup> Compared to such materialism as the rule of knowledge and government, that of Mao was a materialism of the exception because its core was the subjective invention. The 'primacy of practice' is in fact that the experimental principle – that being, political, scientific or technical-productive – is a principle which is moreover marked by an infinite series of internal discontinuities, or more precisely, the "leaps" from practice to theory, then back again to practice, and so on, endlessly.<sup>6</sup>

Some might object that such a philosophical comparison leaves unsolved the question of any specific political difference. As is well-known, after the end of the revolutionary era, the prevailing opinion is that political differences between Mao and Stalin were irrelevant, not to mention the equation of both with Hitler. The Cultural Revolution, wrote the political sociologist Andrew Walder, is a series of "variations on a Stalinist theme," and this can be considered another kind of "Great Purges", perhaps with a more egalitarian pitch, although even more ferocious.<sup>7</sup> Valerio Romitelli, a political philosopher, also argued that "Bombard the headquarters", the famous Mao's dazibao at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, echoes the slogan "Fire on saboteurs!".<sup>8</sup> This opened in 1935 one of the Great Purges among the industrial cadres, emerging at the dawn of the Stakhanovite movement.

Upon closer inspection, however, such alleged self-evidences provide a very different picture. Firstly, whereas the Great Purges in

3 Stalin 1938.

4 Note, however, that putting upstream the "dialectical materialism" as the "world view of the Marxist-Leninist party" and the "historical materialism" as its "application to the society and to the history" you get a restoration of the idealism more idealist. If everything grounds on a "world view", the device is "upside-down", even competitor to the classical religious idealism.

5 Lacan 1991

6 Mao 1937

7 Walder 1991.

8 Romitelli 1996.

the USSR led to the physical destruction of countless cadres of the CPSU, in China almost all cadres resumed their places by 1972. The new government that took office in January 1975 was comprised of mostly the same ministers and deputy ministers from 1966.

A more basic difference is apparent from the role of the political figure of the workers in each case. The Great Purges are closely linked to the Stakhanovite movement, that is, the time when the position of workers is "regularised" in the state organization of socialism. Clearly, despite all the heroic rhetoric, the Stakhanovite's political existence was limited to their alleged higher productive capacity. On the other hand, Stakhanovism destabilized the traditional hierarchies of industrial work and thus required new forms of control that would guarantee to effectively discipline workers. If "the cadres decide everything", according to well-known Stalin's formula, it is not the same as exercising command on a "Fordist" worker or on a "labor hero." It is no coincidence that the purges in the USSR began hitting *en masse* the technical and industrial managers who "sabotaged" the Stakhanovite movement.<sup>9</sup>

If we look beyond the current fog of bias, we can see in these tragic events the immense exertion required for the organizing of the political existence of Socialist workers. Three decades later, the same difficulties occurred, albeit differently, during the Cultural Revolution.. During the Shanghai January Storm, 1967, masses of workers unexpectedly created independent political organisations outside the CCP. These organisations not only had nothing in common with the Stakhanovite model but they radically questioned the extant forms of political existence of the socialist worker as operating within the party-state.<sup>10</sup> What these organisations destabilized was not only the industrial command, but also the entire historical-political foundation of the CCP as the 'vanguard of the working class.'

The decisive role, respectively, of the Stakhanovism for Stalinism, and of the Shanghai January Storm for Maoism, disclose two political orientations which are irreducible to the vague similarities of their revolutionary slogans:<sup>11</sup> That the political existence of the workers was secured by their inclusion in the socialism state apparatus, or that it should pass through the reinvention of their relationship with the party-state, constituted the point of maximum difference between Stalinism

9 For detailed analysis, see Benvenuti 1988, Siegelbaum 1990.

10 Jiang 2014.

11 Moreover, if considering the magnitude of the issues at stake, the January Storm was one of the most peaceful of the Cultural Revolution. Shanghai was substantially free of factional fighting throughout this revolutionary decade.

and Maoism.

To conceive of egalitarian politics as the stabilization of a governmental order or, conversely, as a set of mass initiatives, has become the foundation of the aforementioned philosophical divergence between materialism as an alternate name for the general space of knowledge and materialism as a field for experimental possibilities.

The points of difference between Maoism and Stalinism also emerged as a complex evolution. Until 1949, Mao was able to negotiate a certain compatibility with the materialism 'regularized' by Stalin. Despite the differences that did exist since the Thirties, Mao acted until the Liberation on its own experimental terrain, which is to say, the 'protracted people's war,' encompassing one political and military invention of the first magnitude of the twentieth century. For his part, Stalin could perceive, at most, a transition tactically necessary for establishing a socialist state.

After 1949, the situation changed dramatically. The victory over the Guomindang and the foundation of the PRC, on the one hand halted one century of national decline and humiliation. However, on the other hand, it brought to closure the previous political terrain. While during the two decades of the people's war the core issue was how to organize the political vitality of the peasants, after Liberation China's political horizon was centred on how to construct a new governmental order. From this point on, the area of negotiation with Stalinism became increasingly restricted and soon almost completely closed. The entire state apparatus, from the organization of the factories to the universities, was largely imported and often slavishly copied from the Soviet Union. As a widespread slogan of the early fifties announced, "The Soviet Union today is our tomorrow" (苏联的今天就是我们的明天).

When, along with the 20th Congress of the CPSU, the leaders of the firstborn socialist state did stagger the credit of the Soviet model, the predicament became even more serious. Mao reacted with intensifying experimental initiatives – as he maintained, an original path was indispensable however, this was met growing hostility and unsurmountable obstacles from within the party-state.

In the last two decades of Maoism, the search for new perspectives of egalitarian politics generated unbridgeable discontinuities within the "political episteme" of the socialist states of the time. These appeared "symptomatically" in a series of statements from Mao converging on the issue of the "probable defeat". A defeat which concerned both the results of the Cultural Revolution and the destinies of the socialist states. This is alongside the added complication that far from expressing capitulationism, Mao's statements were strong appeals to political mobilisation. To be sure, a political appeal that put 'defeat' as 'the most probable' outcome was not only inconceivable in the political culture of the Communist parties of that time, but was also in itself an (even far too)

evident paradox, which requires a closer reading in order to assess its political significance.

### The urge for opening a research

Mao's statements on the "probable defeat" have been for some years a fillip for me as it indicates a need to reopen a window of research into the Cultural Revolution, particularly at a time when 'thorough negation' has become the fulcrum of Chinese governmental ideology as well as global scholarly opinion.. After the violent suppression of the mass revolts of 1989 in China and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Communist parties under the hegemony of the CPSU, a wave of radical discredit swept the whole 'historical experience' of Marxism and Socialism. One crucial issue was undoubtedly the assessment of the Chinese revolutionary decade between the Sixties and Seventies. By the mid-Nineties the Cultural Revolution, which had already been the object of intense defamation for twenty years (above all by the Chinese government) had firmly taken root as a kind of obscure epicenter, albeit zealously removed, of the entire cultural horizon of modern egalitarian politics.

In conditions so triumphantly anti-revolutionary, it was hardly selfevident to reconsider Mao's statements on the 'probable defeat' as opening as a promising research path on the Cultural Revolution. Surely, in the neo-liberal upsurge of the Nineties, those statements were proving highly predictive since Mao had maintained during the Cultural Revolution, "in China it is quite easy to make capitalism" (在中国搞资本主义很容易). Yet, what attracted most my attention was not exactly their "prophetic" value. The forecast was accurate, sign of a forward-looking mind, but what struck me first was the sharp dissonance of those statements with the then extant set of revolutionary political discourses, all of which claimed a strong 'victorious' consistency of the revolutionary political culture.

My starting point was to read these statements on the 'probable defeat' not only as predictions, but primarily as 'symptoms.' In other words, I consider these as associated to a series of attempts by Mao to deal with the radical predicament that his own political intent could be met within the space of political culture of the Communist parties. This is particularly relevant from the mid-Fifties onward.

In this paper, will also try to reply to some objections on my reading of Mao's statements on the "probable defeat". Someone have asked if I had not overestimated some sporadic statements not representative of Mao's positions during the last two decades of his life. I will argue here that there is a persistent thread of thought in Mao's statements on this issue since the second half of the fifties. Moreover, Mao's attitude becomes more theoretically argued during the Cultural Revolution, especially during the final years of this decade.

Some have also commented that in the exam of Mao's statements

I have drawn a hopeless picture of the Cultural Revolution and, by consequence, of the contemporary perspectives on egalitarian politics., One major singularity of Mao's position was the tension between two thrusts apparently contradictory, that is to say the lucid prediction of a probable epochal closure and the appeal for making this probability the object of a large political mobilization. I return to and elaborate on this point during this paper.

Someone has even objected that by focusing on this issue, I have ultimately subscribed a vision analogous to Fukuyama's 'end of history.' The path that I propose is, however, completely different to this misreading. What the Cultural Revolution, and in general the 'Long Sixties,' brings to closure, is not history, but rather the transitivity of history and politics, which was a pivotal concept of the governmental discourse of the socialist states. The Cultural Revolution was the mass laboratory that has proven the insurmountable limit of an alleged historical guarantee for egalitarian politics.

### Mao's "sinthome"

Althusser's seminal idea of 'symptomatic reading' has been surely a primary reference for my work. In reading the great thinkers, Althusser recommended, we should also carefully listen to the "voids" that "resonate" in their thought.<sup>12</sup> His proposal to read symptomatically "a concept essential for the thought but absent in the discourse" in Marx is a strong philosophical warning to retain the distinction between thought and discourse.

In the wake of this insight, we might postulate also that the "symptom" does not merely testify to a preexisting conceptual absence, but it is a process that originates from one subjective intention and leads to the emergence of one peculiar void. The void is thus ubiquitous in discourse, as in every other situation, as Badiou has clearly articulated. Still, only when the symptom repeatedly localizes a point of void in the discourse, the absence of a concept appears as 'essential for thought.'

Of course, there are different results depending on the different strength and tenacity of the subjective urge. In one given discourse, most symptoms are transient and easily reabsorbed without leaving traces. There are however, exceptionally, symptoms that persist and fix a discontinuity which cannot be neutralized and thus may develop into factors of major intellectual novelty.

I suggest therefore reading symptomatically Mao's statements on the 'probable defeat,' arguing that the subjective intention upstream – the egalitarian politics that Mao promotes from the mid-fifties – localises a void in a pivotal area of the "governmental discourse" of the socialist

12 Althusser 1965.

states.

Mao's statements germane to the topic of 'probable defeat' extended over two decades, from the mid-Fifties to the mid-Seventies. It is a reiterated symptom and, hence, precisely because of its insistence, something that in many ways is a distinctive subjective feature throughout the last phase of Mao's political itinerary. In this sense, we can tentatively call it, citing a Lacanian concept, a "sinthome," which is something that in the end constitutes an irrepressible mark of subjective existence.<sup>13</sup> We can conjecture that this sinthome concerns fundamental political dilemmas.

The most striking aspect of the issue of 'probable defeat' provides a jarring dissonance with the 'certainty of victory.' During the past few decades, we have been so accustomed to seeing most of the communist parties founded in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – especially in Europe – overwhelmed by a self-destructive drive that we might underestimate how crucial the issue of 'victory' (in its 'historical' sense) was in their ideological outlook and organizational imprint from the 1950s to the 1970s. Then, "as for magic", as Mao foresaw, they changed from "victorious" Communist bureaucrats to extremist apologists of neoliberalism.<sup>14</sup>

The full affirmation of the theme of 'certainty of victory' traces back to the consolidation of the Soviet Union government in the Thirties. In 1936, two decades after the October Revolution, Stalin expressed with indisputable optimism: "The complete victory of the Socialist system in all spheres of the national economy is now a fact".<sup>15</sup> The stabilisation of the Socialist state was, in this sense, the ultimate proof of the "materialist conception of history," although the Great Purges were a sinister sign of the tragic ambiguity of that complete victory.

Following Khrushchev's "Secret Report" and Stalin's successors, and despite various adjustments and large doses of rhetoric, the main rationale of the socialist states was still measurable, in the last analysis, by the standard of the "historical" guarantee of "victory". The *supplément d'âme* of "humanism," which from the second half of the mid-Fifties was amended to the ideology of most communist parties, did not change the essence of that position. Despite the crisis which emerged from the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU, or rather, as a way to deny the political essence of that crisis, the official ideology of the communist parties in the Fifties and Sixties took for granted that Socialism was in any case the "historical"

13 Lacan 2005.

14 We should not consider the issue as completely outdated. A recent influential essay in the *Journal of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences* assures that now we are witnesses to "The Great Victory of Marxism in China". See Wang 2011.

15 Stalin 1936.

antecedent of Communism. The “history” of “class struggle” guaranteed the “final victory” of communist politics. The fact that references to the “victorious” advent of Communism as well as to the class struggle are mere *flatus vocis*, and further that communist parties, despite all conflicts with their “bourgeois” competitors, were engaged in a web of power relations with them, both domestically and internationally, and this made the situation even more obscure.

The first series of Mao’s statements on the ‘probable defeat’ dates back to the aftermath of the CPSU’s 20<sup>th</sup> Congress. Since 1956 – a watershed in the history of the communist parties of the twentieth century – Mao had been scrutinizing, lucidly as well as anxiously, the depth of the international political crisis while simultaneously, expressing discordant statements and assessments with respect to any ‘victorious’ rhetoric. He made a point of not giving credit to any ‘definitive victory’ of Socialism. Indeed, he even did not consider it the “necessary” historical premise of Communism. Throughout the last two decades of his life, Mao reiterated statements that bucked the ‘certainty of victory.’ Such statements can be considered ultimately a coherent set, in which however we can distinguish, and examine separately, the conditions, targets and those political issues at stake in, at least, three distinct periods.

Mao’s first series of quotes emerging from texts and speeches between 1956 and 1965, pivots on the issue of the danger of capitalist restoration. During 1966-1967, a second group of statements, the expression of “probable defeat” directly appears, which primarily concerns the ongoing political movement. The last statements between late 1974 and early 1976 - the final edge of the revolutionary decade - coincided with the last two years of Mao’s life. These latter statements provide a strong theoretical thesis aimed to assess the whole of the political experiments that he had promoted, particularly after 1949. Let me consider in further detail the three series of statements.

### “The Danger of Capitalist Restoration”

From the late Fifties to the mid-Sixties Mao repeatedly maintained that the ‘danger of capitalist restoration’ loomed in China, as in all Socialist countries. The essence of such remarks, however, was not limited to the historical-political conceptual framework to which that formula referred. The “danger” concerned not so much the place of the socialist state within a “great logic” of the development of history, which at that time would be geared toward “regression” rather than toward “progression”. The issue at stake was rather the great dilemma for the modern revolutionaries: the organisational invention necessary for experimenting egalitarian politics.

Anticipating the outcome, which I shall draw from a close reading

of Mao’s remarks, a formulation of the crux of the quandary is as follows: If revolutionary politics can only exist through original forms of egalitarian organisation, what attitude must they adopt toward the governmental circumstances of Socialism? Mao often cautioned that without fresh egalitarian experiments Socialism would “probably” be doomed to “defeat”. This is the pivotal point of his articulation.

His earliest statements on this issue also coincided with the beginning of the Sino-Soviet dispute initiated by two 1956 editorials in the *People’s Daily*, both strongly inspired and carefully revised by Mao, entitled *On the Historical Experience of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*.<sup>16</sup> The topic of the assessment of the “historical experience” sets the tone for the entire dispute between Mao and the CPSU, and further provides the leitmotif of Mao’s political initiatives over his next two decades. During 1975-76 a vast political movement was promoted by Mao to reassess the political essence of the dictatorship of the proletariat and this marked the final sequence of the Cultural Revolution.

The “dictatorship of the proletariat” was the ultimate criterion of the class-based vision of egalitarian politics, or the rational essence of politics as ‘the history of class struggle.’ It is relevant to note that, around 1957, the first theoretical step of Mao, in parallel with the opening of the divergence with the CPSU, concerned the ‘class’ nature of communist politics. Confronted with what he then considered (and more openly in later years) as an epochal crisis of the very conception of revolutionary politics, Mao began to look for a way out of the aporias of classist politics.

In a famous text of 1957 on how “correctly handling” the immense field of the “contradictions among the people”, Mao argued that Communist politics should deal with innumerable tasks as fundamentally “non-classist.” The “contradictions among the people” in principle depend neither on “class antagonism,” nor “class alliances”, but rather require a new political perspective that we might call “metaclassist”. However, while Mao opens a new door on this field, his grasp is inevitably groping.

On the one hand, he never abandons the epistemic framework of the classist conceptual device – “class struggle”, “class antagonism” and “class party” – that remains both a fully active theoretical reference and as a general synonym of egalitarian and emancipatory politics. It is also a reference not only active but also hyperactive. When Mao initiated a drive to reactivate politics a few years later, the approach he takes is pitched at a rather “hyperclassist” angle, as in “*never forget class struggle*”, the famous directive of 1962.

On the other hand, the political initiatives he is prompting exceeds

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<sup>16</sup> The second was entitled *More on the Historical Experience of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*. The *Renmin Ribao* published them respectively on April 5, 1956 and December 29, 1956.

classism, and a close analysis would reveal that Mao meets chief obstacles in the ambiguity of classist references. We could say that his oscillation between a “metaclassist” perspective and a “hyperclassist” accent was at the core of the “sinthome”.

The issue on which Mao raises increasingly radical questions is actually the key point of revolutionary classism, which is the relation between the Communist Party and the Socialist state. It is why the “dictatorship of the proletariat” was so crucial an issue throughout two decades. First, Mao calls into question the issue of the “historical” transition from socialism to communism. In the 1957 speech, *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People*, Mao maintains that the question of “who will win”, whether it be socialism or capitalism, “has not been really resolved yet.”<sup>17</sup> Only new egalitarian inventions can solve the problem in favor of Socialism. Mao, to be sure, does not limit himself to talking about a possible victory of capitalism, but actively promotes all sorts of initiatives to contrast it.

In the early Sixties, after the closure of the *Great Leap Forward*, Mao raised again the issues of the fate of revolutionary politics and the socialist state. He remarked on several occasions that “a socialist society can generate a new bourgeoisie,”<sup>18</sup> and that there remains a “danger of bourgeois restoration”.<sup>19</sup> Even “bourgeois revolutions”, he noted, had met several reversals of fortune and, hence, a socialist China too could “go in the opposite direction.”<sup>20</sup>

Although the formula “restoration of capitalism” is compatible with the vision of “historical progress” that harbors the risk of a “regression,” the crux of this controversy exceeded the peculiar historicism that dominated the ideology of the communist parties of the time. Almost all the other Communist parties invariably repeated that Mao’s statements were ludicrous. The very idea that a socialist state could become “capitalist” (and could do so “peacefully”, another point stressed in the controversy with the CPSU) and the Communist parties were about to become part of a “bourgeois government” was *prima facie* evidence – intoned both *Pravda* and *L’Unità* – of insane extremism.

When in the Sixties the CCP declared – surely under Mao’s unrelenting pressure – that the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet

17 Mao 1957. This specific passage appeared in the revised edition. For the original speech, equally concerned with the issue, see Mao 1989 (1957), pp. 130-189.

18 Mao 1969b (1962), p. 407.

19 Mao 1969b (1962), p. 422.

20 Mao 1969c (1962), p. 431.

Union had *already* taken place, obviously the CPSU and its satellites thundered against the “divisive” attitude. This stance, they maintained, was irresponsibly harming the “unity of the international communist movement” and its “victorious march” towards Communism. Even more amazing is the accuracy of the forecast, especially considering that almost nothing of the phenomenal conditions of the “restoration of capitalism” in the USSR, not to mention those in China, at the time is comparable to today,

### “Why Do I Put the Possibility of Defeat in the First Place?”

A second series of Mao’s statements in 1966-67 clusters at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, when he focused on a “probable defeat,” this time referring not only to the general crisis of the Socialist states, but also to the difficulty of finding a political way out of the woods. To search for new forms of political organisation is both highly urgent and a very arduous task. Mao gives maximum support to all mass political initiatives undertaken during those years, even the most embryonic. When he says they are “probably” destined to “defeat”, he is stressing, apart from the intrinsic difficulty of this task, another key problem: that something essential in revolutionary politics exceeds the established criteria of “victory” and “defeat”.

It is very indicative that during this time Mao was speaking of ‘probable defeat’ mostly in moments of a prevailing expectation of imminent ‘victory,’ or at least during a time when many people were apt to think that great results were in sight.<sup>21</sup> He says so, for example, when he is about to launch the *Circular of 16 May*; the opening document for the Cultural Revolution. In a conversation on 5 May 1966 with Mehmet Shehu, then Deputy Secretary of the Party of Labour of Albania, Mao speaks extensively on this topic:

My health is quite good but Marx will eventually invite me to visit him. The development of things is independent of the will of men.... Do you know when revisionism will occupy Beijing? Those who now support us will suddenly and as if by magic (摇身一变) become revisionists. This is the first possibility.... When those of our generation die, it is very likely that revisionism will come about... We’re at dusk, so now, taking advantage of the fact that we still have some breath, let us give a bit of a hard (整一整) to the restoration of capitalism... In short, we should have in mind two possibilities: the first is that there is a counter-revolutionary dictatorship, a counterrevolutionary restoration. Putting this probability in the first place, we are a bit worried. I too sometimes am distressed. To say that I do not think so and do not feel anxiety would be false. However,

21 Wang Hui rightly reminded me that Mao called the Ninth Congress in 1969 “a congress of unity and victory” (Mao, 1969a). However, it is notable, that Mao’s most victorious statements of the decade preceded one of the most tortuous passages, the tragic clash with Chen Boda and Lin Biao of 1970-71.

I woke up, I called some friends to a meeting, we are discussing a bit and we are looking for a solution.<sup>22</sup>

Incidentally, it is surprising how often Mao raised the issue of probable defeat when he met delegates from Albania in between 1966 and 1967. Of course, during those years, almost no other Communist Party would send delegates to visit China, but it may well be that Mao insisted on revealing his political anxiety to his Albanian comrades as a way of forewarning them against a vision of Socialism which comfortably couched the terms of the “certainty of victory,” towards their inclination.

What Mao ironically called the imminent “invitation by Marx to visit him” added an element of pathos, as in the prediction in the letter to Jiang Qing of a couple of months later in which he states, “At my death the right will seize power.”<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, this was much less important than the question of how to manage, as there was still some breadth, to “give a bit of hard” to capitalism, and also to those who “now support us” but would turn suddenly, “as if by magic”, into successful “revisionists”.

Between April and May 1966, during the time of meeting with the Albanians, Mao was undertaking a series of daring moves to regain a political initiative at a time of maximum “encirclement”. His main subjective motive, far from the “bloody” dream of a “perfect society” for which he continued to be relentlessly vilified by his inconsolable enemies, had, if anything, to do with his peculiar anxiety. At the heart of Mao’s political “anguish” – he repeatedly called it so – there was surely the issue of the ‘probable defeat’, but his main concern was how to find the courage to turn the diagnosis of the impending end of an entire political and cultural era into a series of positive political prescriptions.

One prerequisite of the courage necessary for the political experiments Mao envisaged was to acknowledge that the indispensable and urgent endeavor of the Cultural Revolution was not only arduous, but even almost impossible. During the mid-1967, for instance, Mao clarified his position to a visiting military delegation from Tirana –Albanian comrades – when he said, “There are two possibilities, that revisionism will overthrow us, or we will overthrow revisionism. Why do I put defeat as the first possibility? See the issue in this way is beneficial, it allow us not underestimate the enemy” (我为什么把失败放在第一可能呢? 这样看问题有利, 可以不轻视敌人).<sup>24</sup> With another Albanian delegation,

22 From Feng and Jin 2003, p. 1410. The meetings Mao mentioned were of the Central Committee, which was about to issue the *Circular of 16 May, 1966*.

23 Mao 1998 (1966), pp. 71-75

24 Mao 1969d (1967), p. 633. In the same talk, Mao also struck a quite optimistic note when

he insisted a few months later: “Most probably revisionism will win out, and we will be defeated. Through the probable defeat, we will arouse everyone’s attention “(用可能失败去提醒大家).”<sup>25</sup> The date of this last statement was immediately after the Shanghai January Storm, a moment when many tended to put “victory” as “the first possibility”.<sup>26</sup>

### “Without a Fundamental Theoretical Clarification Revisionism Will Win”

The third and most deployed manifestation of the ‘symptom’ is located in a series of statements by Mao between late 1974 and early 1976. Marx’s “invitation to visit him” became more pressing and, perhaps in anticipation of this “meeting”, Mao elaborated a theoretical perspective that frames the overall assessment not only of the decade of the Cultural Revolution, but also of the socialist era. Here Mao, while confirming his previous analysis also refines and calibrates his focus through the lens of the results of the Cultural Revolution without ignoring its limits, insufficiencies and errors. Something essential, he said, was “not yet clear” (不清楚) in revolutionary politics, an “unknown” (不知道) element that hindered egalitarian politics. Thus, in order to find a fundamental “clarification”, he proposed a great mass mobilization underpinned by a strong theoretical commitment to be extended to “the whole country.”<sup>27</sup>

Mao’s pronouncements in these two years concerned precisely the destiny of the Socialist State and the Communist Party—an irrepressible symptom indeed. Significantly, a key issue is that of the dictatorship of the proletariat, a concern evidently connected to the starting point of the Sino-Soviet conflict twenty years earlier, although this is set within in a broader field of vision that also takes into account the Cultural Revolution. In late 1974 and early 1975, Mao stated something that had no

he said that with the Cultural Revolution a form was finally found to fully mobilize the masses “to reveal our dark sides” (来揭发我们的黑暗面). Note that the obscurity to be revealed was internal (“our”) to the subjective egalitarian body.

25 Mao 1969e (1967), p. 673.

26 It can be better understood that Mao’s position was not generally sceptical or even capitulationist if one assesses his attitude in the famous meeting with the leaders of the Red Guards in Beijing in July 1968. Here he was faced with the first major debacle –self-defeat – of the Cultural Revolution. It was the moment of the political exhaustion of the independent organizations, especially among Beijing students. The meeting was called to declare the definitive impasse of the Red Guards, reduced in those months to small youthful gangs engaged in a senseless armed struggle with each other for some imaginary power. At the time, Mao declined to say that he had always known it would end like this. When in 1968 he encountered a real defeat, which had partial strategic value, Mao pondered the situation carefully and in detail and decided a strategic retreat. Elements of analysis of this critical moment in Russo 2005 (elaborate on citation).

27 Mao 1998 (1974), p. 413.

precedent in Marxist political culture: that it is by no means self-evident what the dictatorship of the proletariat really is. Further, he maintains that “it is necessary to clarify this issue” (这个问题要搞清楚).

The ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ for Mao does not “historically” assure the transition from “Socialism” to “Communism.” Moreover, it is a concept whose “lack of clarity” is one major factor that favored the establishment of capitalism in China. Mao even states that socialism is “not so different” (没有多少差别) from capitalism, “except for the form of ownership.” A form that nevertheless is not definitive, as present-day China clearly evinces.

The problem was how to “limit” the spontaneous anti-egalitarian tendency inherent in every form of government, since its essence consists in ultimately preserving and extending the system of ritual hierarchies of a given socio-historical world. Mao argued that the “rule” of the bourgeois government, which he called the “legal power of the bourgeoisie” or “bourgeois right” (资产阶级法权), did also exist in a Socialist state and “could only be limited” (只能加以限) by egalitarian politics. Except that the name of the extant form of political organisation for the limitation of the bourgeois “rule” was at that moment the dictatorship of the proletariat, which finally was not “so different” from the other government circumstances of the modern world and, even worse, whose political essence was still “to clarify”.

The Cultural Revolution ends as a broad theoretical movement poised on vital issues. The thorough-negation historiography can be rather forgetful of this moment, or rather, distorts its content because it contradicts the image of terrorism and disaster that has been imposed for decades. In early 1975, Mao tried to introduce these fundamental issues during a mass debate named “Movement for the study of the theory.” Here, it is crucial that the masses themselves must clarify the concept of “the dictatorship of the proletariat”. The issue “should be brought before the whole country” (要使全国知道), because “if this problem is not clarified it is likely that revisionism will prevail” (这个问题不搞清楚就会变修正主义).

Mao focuses once more on the fate of the Socialist state while at the same time reinforcing its connection to a need for a political initiative to counter a probable outcome. Here the mobilization takes on a markedly theoretical turn that seeks to initiate and fully develop the cognizance of the masses concerning the fundamental options of egalitarian politics as a condition of countering any “revisionist transformation.” During a dispute with Deng Xiaoping in 1975 - a key year in Chinese politics - in the course of which the latter will posit the basic conditions for his program, Mao insisted that the vital task of revolutionary politics can be considered theoretical research. For several months, he managed to promote a very lively and original “movement for the study of theory”, despite the determined opposition of Deng, who instead proclaimed the absolute

urgency of discipline and a “return to order” (整顿).

By autumn of the same year, Mao finally proposed a new mass debate aimed at analysing (Mao says just “doing research,” 研究) the “shortcomings” (有所不足) of the Cultural Revolution. It promised to be an extremely original debate in light of the issues discussed during the “movement for the study of theory”. Mao was fully aware that many aspects of the Cultural Revolution were unacceptable and that there were different opinions on the matter. Some people, he said, were dissatisfied only because they wanted to “settle accounts” (算帐) with the Cultural Revolution, whereas others bore a grudge for having been unjustly oppressed and persecuted, not to mention the destructive and self-destructive factionalist armed struggles that had occurred. Mao knew that the Cultural Revolution had suffered serious losses for its internal causes, namely that the setbacks of 1968 originated from the ranks of the revolutionaries, and he had hoped that they would be able to discuss openly their own mistakes.

However, in this case Deng’s opposition was decisive and the national debate over what had not worked in the revolutionary decade did never start. Mao repeatedly invited Deng to lead the mass debate on the defects of the Cultural Revolution. Deng, on his part, was so adamantly opposed to this that he suffered a temporary reversal in the months following. It was, however, to prove no more than a slight tactical withdrawal than a reversal because Deng’s determined opposition to Mao would soon become one of his strategic strengths. By preventing an open debate on the Cultural Revolution, and especially by managing to distance himself from it, Deng laid the groundwork for the “thorough negation.” Deng was interested only in “settling scores” with the Cultural Revolution instead of discerning right from wrong.

Mao’s proposal of such a mass debate was the last attempt for testing the possibility of reactivating a positive attitude of the Party towards an experimental vision of politics. Deng’s firm refusal, on the contrary, was a clear sign that the Party as a whole was definitely impervious to such a reactivation. In this situation, between late 1975 and early 1976, Mao finally formulated a crucial theoretical thesis. “In making the socialist revolution,” he maintained, “one does not know where the bourgeoisie is; the bourgeoisie is right in the Communist Party” (搞社会主义革命, 不知道资产阶级在哪里, 资产阶级就在共产党内).<sup>28</sup>

I have proposed elsewhere that a more accurate translation would require a reversal of terms, *viz.*, “the Communist Party is right in the bourgeoisie.”<sup>29</sup> It is a forcing, of course, but the literal translation, “the

28 Russo 2013.

29 Russo 2016.

bourgeoisie in the party," is misleading, because it can be understood as merely a "variation on the Stalinist theme" of "conspiracy", of "infiltrates" and so on. However, if we look beyond the "classist" perspective, "bourgeoisie" is the name of the dominant governmental subjectivity of the modern socio-historical world. It is therefore more accurate to maintain that, structurally speaking, the Communist Party occupies a place within the dominant governmental subjectivity. As for the predictive value of this thesis, the place occupied by the Communist Party in contemporary China could not be a more compelling demonstration.

Recapitulating the last step of Mao's theoretical itinerary, the point of departure was that "one does not know" 不知道 *bu zhidao*. The key issue here is the relationship between egalitarian politics and the dominant governmental subjectivity. Rather and more specifically, the issue is elaborated to how to identify and fix the lines of demarcation in the course of this political experiment. For Mao, this was the fundamental problem that Socialism leaves unresolved, literally "unknown." This beckons, what is the fundamental obstacle? Why, in the conditions of Socialism, "does one not know" precisely where the dominant governmental subjectivity, or the "bourgeoisie", is located (在哪里)? Because the Communist Party that holds the government power in the Socialist State is itself conceived as the essence of the egalitarian organisational invention. Rather, it self-represents as the perfect balance, moreover "historically" guaranteed, between both political inventions and governmental circumstances.

### Prediction, Prescription, "You Must Go On"

However, when emphasising a symptomatic reading, does not one overshadow the character explicitly predictive of the above mentioned Mao's statements? After all, it has been quite easy "to make capitalism in China". How was it possible for Mao to make such an accurate forecast at a time when the existence of Socialism as a form of state alternative to capitalism seemed an undisputable fact?

This issue concerns the tensions between prediction and prescription. One might say that the theoretical lucidity of the prediction depended on the fact that Mao was very familiar with the structure of the social situation in China. He was also aware of the paths the governmental elite were eager to take, as well as of the "balance of power" and ultimately of the limits of his political initiatives. Nevertheless, although he was clear that China would be "restored capitalism" and that the revolutionary enterprise would be 'probably defeated', he declared that it was necessary "to bring the Cultural Revolution to the end."

But what did it mean "to the end," since "the end" would have been "most likely" capitalism? How could a predictive thesis so cogent, rather

than fueling pessimism and capitulationism, complement a political prescription so determined? How might one explain that the prediction of the "restoration of capitalism" was also the premise to great revolutionary appeals?

The prediction pointed the rule, whereas the prescription concerned a possible exception. Capitalism is the rule for the governments of the modern world; egalitarian inventions are the exceptions. When Mao warned that a defeat could be imminent, he meant that the "world" would have "probably" reinstated its "rule,"<sup>30</sup> while the revolutionaries should go on in experimental politics despite their temporary weaknesses and possible imminent closure. The set of Mao's statements finally pivots on the issue of "go on," as in the well know subjective injunction at the end of Samuel Beckett's *Unnamable*, "You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on."

"You must go on" is certainly a key position throughout the political route of Mao, from the first political texts of the May 4 Movement of 1919 to the end of the Cultural Revolution. Even when he says, "Never forget class struggle," beyond the "hyperclassist" pitch (which still had, at that time, counter-effects) the essential sentiment is that "you must go on" in egalitarian experimental politics.

"I can't go on" repeatedly emerges in the statements I have deliberated upon. "One does not know", "it is not clear," "my anxiety" and so on evidently concern the "how to continue." The series of Mao's thesis that launched in 1975 the study campaign even started with the question, "why Lenin said 'dictatorship of the proletariat'?" A question, moreover, that Mao himself left unanswered. "The entire country" should find a way out of the woods.

Yet, "I'll go on." Even when his forces are at the limit, he does not cease to give "a bit of hard to capitalism." In the last two years, he attempts to launch three political campaigns, all strongly marked by theoretical intents, one on the basic "theory" of revolutionary politics, another, adamantly opposed by Deng, on a mass "research" on the errors of the decade. In September 1975, Mao even prompted a critical rereading of the popular classical novel *Water Margins* 水浒传 stigmatizing the "capitulationism" of the protagonist Song Jiang, a legendary leader of the peasant revolts who finally led his army to be reabsorbed in the imperial "rule."

Moreover, the epochal size of the likely imminent "defeat" fueled Mao's obstinacy for a large political mobilisation. The probable closure

30 "In accordance with the rules of this world, I have long thought that such a day would come" (按照这个世界的规则,我早就想好了有这么一天). This was the debut of the laconic declaration of Zhang Chunqiao at the "trial of the gang of four" in 1981. Zhang, who had been the leader closer to Mao during the Cultural Revolution, spoke very little at the trial, since he said he had not much to say to the new organs of power that had "taken the capitalist road", and vindicated his political stand alongside Mao. While he, too, knew the "rule" of the historical-modern social world, he was proud to have participated to the egalitarian exceptions. (Zhang 1981)

of an ideological and organizational horizon of egalitarian politics long more than one century needed a thorough mass test. "You must go on," in that case, implied a "beyond" the anticipated certainty that the given intellectual conditions for thinking about equality politically were close to an end. The political appeal was meant to be so universal that it even disregarded the balance of power in the governmental circumstances of that peculiar conjuncture. It addressed both at the political subjectivities of that time and to an undetermined temporality when new ways for rethinking the political issues at stake could "go on."

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