In a 1972 interview titled “Pamphlet against the Sinophobes,” the Italian writer and Communist activist Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, having just returned from a trip to China, praised the Cultural Revolution as a model for the West. Instead of clinging to the “ideal socialism” of the Soviet Union, Macciocchi urged her readers to look toward the “original socialism” unfolding in China. Only “Mao Tse-Tung Thought” had been able to “seize and dominate the contradictions” of Marxist philosophy and politics. “The Cultural Revolution,” Macciocchi continued, “is a first response to this historical set of questions and this is why I have spoken about China as an (illuminating) fact for our history, in the face of the workers’ movement’s crisis.” Macciocchi, who was close to many important French thinkers of the time, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Louis Althusser, concluded that the revolution ought to be pursued at the level of ideology and, citing Althusser, within the “ideological state apparatuses.”

As various critics have pointed out, the “China” that seduced so many Maoist French intellectuals during the 1960s and 1970s had less to do with the reality of the Communist nation than with the French political, social, and cultural context of the time. “China” operated as a projection screen for a French Revolutionary tradition that, according to some like Richard Wolin, was exhausting itself, or, according to others like Kristin Ross, was reinvigorated in the 1960s. “China” was also, as different scholars have suggested, an Orientalism, a misreading, a dream, a utopia, a fantasy, a weltanschauung, an epistemology through which French intellectuals could work out various of the political and aesthetic questions that preoccupied them during
those years. When the students of the Maoist organization la Gauche Prolétarienne (GP) referred to the “China in our heads,” they seemed aware of this fantasmatic construction in which the signifier mattered more than the signified. But their motto, “China in our heads,” could also be understood in light of Macciocchi’s quote, as a call for a revolution in ideology, a revolution in “our heads,” the only revolution possible given the “historical crisis” facing French Communism in the 1960s. By triggering “China in our heads,” the radical left would no longer focus on acquiring the means of production; rather, it would start to think about relations of reproduction.

The problem of reproduction was also central to much of French philosophy during those years. Thinkers as different as Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Luce Irigaray foregrounded the question of psychic subjection, or assujettissement, in the sense of being subject to power but also constituted by it. The philosophical contributions of these authors cannot, of course, be simply understood as “documents,” as symptoms of this particular French context, but it is undeniable that what Macciocchi referred to as the “historical crisis of the workers’ movement” did influence at least some of these figures. Deleuze and Guattari claimed, for instance, that their Anti-Oedipus, published in 1972, was an attempt to wrestle with the “questions left unanswered by the aborted revolution of May ’68.” “Our starting point,” Guattari explained, “was to consider how during these crucial periods, something along the order of desire was manifested throughout the society as a whole, and then was repressed, liquidated, as much by the government and police as by the parties and so-called workers unions and, to a certain extent, the leftist organizations as well.” The explanation for why workers systematically acted against their interests and sabotaged their own potential emancipation had to lie somewhere else, namely at the level of subjectivity. Subjects had been conditioned to think and act a certain way through a particularly insidious process Deleuze and Guattari called “Oedipalization.”

Althusser’s 1970 essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (ISA) was also concerned with the “reproduction of the conditions of production.” As Althusser famously argued, ideology was the “imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.” Ideology was the unconscious mechanism through which individuals were coerced, but also the way individuals were produced, “interpellated” as subjects. Like Anti-Oedipus, Althusser’s text was deeply shaped by the “crisis” of French Marxism in the late 1960s. Ideology, in this sense, was Althusser’s way of introducing “China in our heads.” For if the ISA article engaged primarily with Marx, it was also a conversation with Maoism, or more specifically with what circulated in France as “la pensée mao tsé-toung.”
Indeed, throughout the 1960s, Althusser attentively read Mao’s writings, which were translated in four volumes published between 1962 and 1968. He also followed Chinese politics closely, especially during the Cultural Revolution, through the Chinese Communist Party’s newsletters Pékin information and Les cahiers de la Chine nouvelle, which he received regularly.7 While Althusser never left the French Communist Party (PCF), which he had joined in 1948, many of his most brilliant students in the late 1960s departed from the PCF orthodoxy to form a Maoist student group, the Union des jeunesse communistes marxistes-léninistes, or UJC (ml).

In this article, I would like to consider Althusser’s writings on China in conjunction with his structural rereading of Marx, both of which occurred around the same time, during the 1960s. Althusser’s interest in Marx’s philosophy began with his translation of Ludwig Feuerbach’s Philosophical Manifestos in 1960. In 1961–62, he conducted a seminar on the “young Marx” at the request of his students at the École Normale Supérieure (ENS), one of France’s elite institutions of higher learning. During those years, his students included Pierre Macherey, Roger Establet, Étienne Balibar, Christian Baudelot, Jacques Rancière, Régis Debray, Jacques-Alain Miller, Alain Badiou, Robert Linhart, Jean-Claude Milner, Jacques Broyelle, and Benny Lévy. The following year, from 1962 to 1963, Althusser’s course on the origins of structuralism addressed the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, and Foucault. Although Althusser rejected the label of “structuralism” to describe his own work, his engagement with structuralism, particularly with Lacan (who began teaching at the ENS in 1963, thanks to Althusser), was absolutely crucial.8 Finally, from 1963 to 1964, in the context of a seminar on Capital, Althusser developed some of his most important theories on Marx, including the notions of symptomatic reading, epistemological break, overdetermination, structural causality, and science versus ideology. In 1965, Althusser published his two best-known works, For Marx and Reading Capital (coauthored with Balibar, Establet, Macherey, and Rancière), which represented the culmination of these years of reflection on Marxist theory.9

My intention here is not to suggest that Althusser’s analysis of China determined his theory of subjection, or vice versa, that his particular reading of Marx “explains” his Maoist sympathies. Rather than positioning these two discourses — “China” and structural Marxism — in a causal relationship, I am interested in exploring how they intersected throughout this period, particularly on three points: the emphasis on contradictions, anti-humanism, and ideology. Ultimately, I would like to argue that Althusser’s “China” and his structuralist interpretation of Marx were both answers to the specific theoretical and political impasses confronting French Marxism in the 1960s.10 More broadly, this essay is also an attempt to rethink French theory during the 1960s and 1970s from a transnational perspective. My
goal is neither to restore an “authentic” China at the origins of structuralism nor to subsume Maoism within the overarching system of European thought, but rather to consider the two dialogically, to write an intellectual history that attends, as Susan Buck-Morss has urged us, “to the edges of systems, the limits of premises, the boundaries of our historical imagination in order to trespass, trouble, and tear these boundaries down.”

The Context: Political and Theoretical Impasses

In the 1967 English preface to *For Marx*, Althusser stressed the fact that his collection of essays (which had all been published in Communist journals between 1960 and 1964) was the product of a particular conjuncture: “First, the theoretical and ideological conjuncture in France, more particularly the present conjuncture in the French Communist Party and in French philosophy. But as well as this peculiarly French conjuncture, it is also the present ideological and theoretical conjuncture in the international Communist movement.” More specifically, Althusser argued, this conjuncture was dominated by two “great events: the critique of the ‘cult of personality’ by the Twentieth Congress, and the rupture that has occurred between the Chinese Communist Party and the Soviet Communist Party.” The Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in February 1956 did indeed profoundly shake the Communist world. In his famous “secret speech” to a closed session of the congress, Nikita Khrushchev, who had taken the party’s directorship after Stalin’s death in 1953, referred to Stalin’s intolerance, brutality, and abuse of power. Moreover, Khrushchev condemned the “cult of personality” around the figure of Stalin, which had harmed, he contended, the interests of the party. Whereas many French intellectuals welcomed Khrushchev’s speech as evidence of Communism’s openness to critique, the PCF emphatically condemned it and denounced all subsequent efforts to de-Stalinize, whether in Poland or in Yugoslavia. In particular, it justified the brutal repression of the Hungarian Revolution by Soviet troops in November 1956 as a necessary prevention against the resurgence of Hungarian fascism. The Hungarian Revolution marked a turning point for many disillusioned French intellectuals who definitively abandoned the party around this time.

The Twentieth Congress was also the catalyst for the Sino-Soviet split, the second “great event,” according to Althusser. Khrushchev’s attack on the cult of personality had obvious implications for Mao, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda was quick to emphasize the differences between the two leaders. Moreover, Khrushchev’s behavior struck Beijing as particularly irresponsible, a verdict that was confirmed by the Hungarian Revolution and the defection of thousands of Commu-
nists from parties in the West.\textsuperscript{15} The relationship between Mao and the Soviet leadership progressively deteriorated. In 1961, the CCP formally denounced the “Revisionist Traitor Group of the Soviet Leadership.” From September 1963 to July 1964, in a series of nine polemics, the Chinese continued to spell out their reasons for breaking with the CPSU. The polemics mentioned Stalin, the issues of peaceful coexistence and peaceful transition to socialism, and Soviet “revisionism.” For many historians of this period, the ninth polemic, titled “On Khrushchev’s Phony Communism and Historical Lessons for the World,” contained the justification for what would turn out to be the Cultural Revolution.\textsuperscript{16} Once again, the Sino-Soviet split highlighted the growing political and ideological rift between the PCF and many French intellectuals. The PCF remained suspicious, if not overtly critical, of China’s defiance of Moscow. Others in France, however, interpreted China’s bold foreign policy as evidence that the “eastern wind” which would eventually prevail over the “western wind” was arriving, not from the Soviet Union but from the Far East, and more specifically, from the third world. If the working classes in the West appeared to have lost their revolutionary spark, the Left needed to look elsewhere: in Africa, in Latin America, and in Asia.

Sartre, in his 1961 preface to Frantz Fanon’s \textit{Wretched of the Earth}, had paved the way for this third-worldism by celebrating the particular violence that could emerge in a postcolonial context. His text appeared especially radical given that the PCF, which in 1956 had voted in favor of granting the French government “special powers” during the Algerian War, had been remarkably slow in condemning French colonialism. In the Algerian case, many in the PCF found it difficult to identify with a revolution that was not explicitly Marxist. Furthermore, the party did not wish to alienate its working-class electorate, which was largely against independence. In 1963, Jacques Vergès, the anticolonialist lawyer who had defended many of the members of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), founded the third-worldist journal \textit{Révolution}. Subtitled \textit{Africa, Latin America, Asia}, \textit{Révolution} celebrated Communist China and published texts by Liu Shaoqi in its inaugural issue.\textsuperscript{17} Many pro-Chinese texts could also be found at François Maspero’s bookstore La Joie de Lire, which, from 1956 to 1975, served as meeting place for third-worldist and anticolonial activists. It was Maspero who published Althusser’s \textit{For Marx} and \textit{Reading Capital} after they were refused by the Communist Party’s official editor, the Éditions Sociales, and it was he who subsequently published many of Althusser’s students, including Rancière and Macherey.\textsuperscript{18} In 1961, Maspero founded another journal, \textit{Partisans}, which opened with the following statement:

\begin{quote}
[We] support, in particular, the Algerian Revolution. We support it in a much vaster context, of which it is only one element: the emergence of the
\end{quote}
third world. We think that our era, and probably all the second half of the twentieth century, will be dominated by the gigantic phenomenon brusquely inaugurated by China: the accession of people of color to the political history of the world, and their growing participation in its economic, cultural, and social history.\textsuperscript{19}

For many \textit{gauchistes} who considered themselves on the left of the Communist Party, China was definitely leading the way.

However, the effects of the Twentieth Congress and the Sino-Soviet split were not simply political. As Althusser indicated, insisting on the unity of theory and practice, this “conjuncture” had produced serious “ideological and theoretical problems.”\textsuperscript{20} It was thus the context that urged Althusser to call for a “return to Marx”; this was “indispensable,” he contended, “if we were to escape from the theoretical impasse in which history had put us.”\textsuperscript{21} The correct interpretation of Marxist theory could, according to Althusser, determine the fate of the socialist revolution itself. Among the theoretical problems that had emerged from the void left by Stalin’s death, Althusser targeted one in particular: humanism. On the one hand, this was a polemic against Khrushchev who had, during the 1961 Twenty-Second Congress of the CPSU, declared that the dictatorship of the proletariat had been “superseded” in the Soviet Union and that his country was no longer a class state but a “State of the Whole People.” The construction of Communism, according to the CPSU, would be guided by the humanist slogan: “Everything in the name of Man.”\textsuperscript{22} As Althusser put it in his 1963 essay “Marxism and Humanism,” “the Soviet Union has proclaimed the slogan: All for Man, and introduced new themes: the freedom of the individual, respect for legality, the dignity of the person.”\textsuperscript{23} Humanism could justify the new Soviet policies of peaceful coexistence (since the fight between imperialism and Communism was no longer perceived as inevitable), and of a potentially peaceful transition to Communism (since class warfare was no longer a precondition).

But Althusser’s attack on humanism was also directed against French Marxist philosophy and politics. It was a critique of the dominant postwar existential/Hegelian Marxism that Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (in different ways) exemplified. In addition, it was a denunciation of the PCF’s embrace of humanism in the early 1960s as part of what some historians have called its \textit{aggiornamento}.\textsuperscript{24} Indeed, after staunchly opposing Khrushchev’s reforms in 1956, the PCF had, by 1961, begun to endorse them and selectively adopt them in an attempt to adapt to “the tide of history.” Furthermore, in 1962, it had agreed to join a coalition of left-wing parties in the hope of winning the 1965 presidential elections. Sharing a political platform with social democrats and left-leaning Catholics required the PCF to emphasize their commonalities. Humanism appeared to serve this
function well, especially in the context of openness and dialogue between Catholics and the Left inaugurated by Vatican II. As one of the leading Communist partisans Gilbert Mury put it at the time: “Unity of action with Catholic workers is a necessary moment in our march towards, first, democracy, and then socialism: it means that Christian humanism is not wholly alien to us . . . the unity of history . . . is that of a [humanist] project that runs through it, and if Marxism is not the application of this project in the age of the rise of the working class, what is it?”25 For Althusser, the PCF’s turn to humanism was particularly despairing given its long history of anti-intellectualism, its so-called ouvriérisme. In the preface to *For Marx*, Althusser referred to it as a “‘French misery’: the stubborn absence of any real theoretical culture in the history of the French workers’ movement.”26

In 1960, the PCF’s secretary general, Maurice Thorez, announced the creation of a Centre d’études et de recherches marxistes (CERM) headed by the philosopher Roger Garaudy, one of the most important theorists of this French Marxist humanism. Starting in 1961, Garaudy organized the popular “weeks of Marxist thought” and contributed to various Communist publications, all in the hope of advancing Marxism as “the humanism of our time.”27 The kind of antihumanism defended in Althusser’s work thus appeared completely at odds with the politics of the PCF. In 1962, Georges Cogniot, the director of the Communist journal *La Pensée*, organized a “theoretical trial” against Althusser for his article “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” first published in this same journal. Althusser was accused of being a “leftist revisionist,” hence, Cogniot contended, “pro-Chinese.”28 “Chinese,” in other words, was becoming a code word for antihumanist philosophy or *structuralism*. Throughout the 1960s, the PCF relentlessly attacked Althusser’s thought. The PCF’s intellectual coordinator, Roland Leroy, referred to Althusser’s “structuralism” as a negation of history, a “philosophy of despair” that was incompatible with political action. Waldeck Rochet, Thorez’s successor, insisted on the idea that it was crucial for the PCF to champion humanism, since its ultimate goal was “man’s happiness, that is to say, man’s liberation.” Althusser’s response was “not at all, our ultimate goal is to trigger a revolution that will put in place a socialist mode of production.”29 Althusser was accused of naïveté, mysticism, of being out of touch with the real world. Throughout these debates, the PCF intellectuals emphasized Althusser’s reliance on Mao and “Chinese thought.”

For Althusser, however, there was much more at stake in Communism’s adoption of humanism than a simple game of electoral politics. Humanism was an *ideological* concept, in Althusser’s definition of the term.30 “Marxism and Humanism,” written in 1963, was one of Althusser’s first attempts to theorize ideology and its opposite, science. “When I say
that the concept of humanism is an ideological concept (not a scientific one),” Althusser wrote, “I mean that while it really does designate a set of existing relations, unlike a scientific concept, it does not provide us with a means of knowing them. In a particular (ideological) mode, it designates some existents, but it does not give us their essences.”31 To clarify these concepts, Althusser turned to Marx and the famous “periodization” of his work. The young Marx, closer to Kant and Fichte than to Hegel, still clung to a “philosophy of man” and to Enlightenment principles. However, in a second stage, from 1842 to 1845, Marx, disillusioned by the Prussian state’s failures to reform, no longer appealed to the “reason of the State.” Nonetheless, he was still unable to abandon the concepts of alienation and of human essence that would supposedly be fulfilled with the advent of the revolution. Marx’s “epistemological break” (a term borrowed by Althusser from the philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard) came in 1845 as Marx was finally able to develop new concepts such as “social formation, productive forces, relations of production, superstructure, ideologies, determination in the last instance by the economy, specific determination of the other levels.” Furthermore, he realized then that humanism was an ideology. 32 According to Althusser, Marx’s radical antihumanism was the absolute condition for scientific knowledge and, consequently, for a real transformation of the politics. “Recognizing” ideology, however, was also recognizing its necessity: “For the knowledge of this ideology, as the knowledge of its conditions of possibility, its structure, of its specific logic and its practical role, within a given society, is simultaneously knowledge of the conditions of its necessity.”33

Thus, for Khrushchev to proclaim the “end” of the revolution and to declare the Soviet Union a “State of the Whole People” was particularly treacherous since “historical materialism [could not] conceive that even a communist society could ever do without ideology, be it ethics, art or ‘world outlook.’”34 Althusser’s point here was not that the ideological struggle was useless—in fact, it was essential—but the belief that any society, including a communist one, could free itself from ideology by turning to humanism was preposterous: “Ideology is not an aberration or a contingent excrescence of History: it is a structure essential to the historical life of societies. Further, only the existence and the recognition of its necessity enable us to act on ideology and transform ideology into an instrument of deliberate action on history.”35 Humanism in this context was an attempt to mask problems, real historical, economic, political, and ideological problems intrinsic to socialism that Stalinism had simply “kept in the shade.”36 Humanism (with its focus on the free development of the individual, respect for socialist legality, dignity of the person, etc.) was the ideology of communism, just as liberalism was the ideology of the bourgeoisie. It was a prolongation of the Stalinist “dogmatism.” Even worse, it
was, as G. M. Goshgarian has put it, “Stalinism with a humanist face.” It was in this context that Althusser turned to “China,” the unity-of-thought-and-practice: “Mao Tse-Tung Thought” (or Maoism) as an example of Marxist science that would be able to grasp the contradictions inherent in all societies. Similarly, Althusser embraced the Cultural Revolution as an effort to eradicate humanist ideology and to conduct a truly antihumanist structuralist revolution.

The Structuralization of China

As Communist leaders in the Soviet Union and in Western Europe were turning to humanism to cope with the effects of de-Stalinization and the Hungarian Revolution, Mao delivered his speech, “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People,” in 1957. Mao’s text was meant to provide a philosophical and political guideline for the CCP, which, after seven years of relative success, was beginning to encounter the first serious domestic and international hurdles. Given Althusser’s objections to the Soviet embrace of humanism, it is easy to understand why Althusser would be attracted to Mao’s analysis. In this essay, Mao famously distinguished two types of contradictions: antagonistic ones between the people and its “enemy,” and nonantagonistic ones within the ranks of the people. While “the former entail drawing a clear distinction between ourselves and the enemy, . . . the latter entail drawing a clear distinction between right and wrong.” The existence of these antagonistic contradictions was proof that the doctrines of “peaceful transition” and of “peaceful coexistence” advanced by the CPSU and the PCF were simply wrong: “Class struggle is by no means over,” Mao wrote. “Therefore, Marxism must continue to develop through struggle.” Nonantagonistic contradictions, however, could be resolved nonviolently, through ideological work: “Ideological struggle differs from other forms of struggle, since the only method is painstaking reasoning, and not crude coercion. Today, socialism is in an advantageous position in the ideological struggle.”

Althusser’s notes on Mao focused on the questions of contradiction, humanism, and ideology. “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions,” Althusser wrote, emphasized the unity of the masses and the fact that we “need to resolve contradictions within a people non-violently because they are not antagonistic, even though they can appear to be so, but only momentarily — i.e. Hungary.” Althusser also turned to Mao’s older texts, including the 1937 “On Practice,” which provided, he claimed, “an excellent definition of Mao’s philosophy” by emphasizing class, “recognizing that dialectical materialism served the proletariat”; but also by retaining a “practical character.” Mao’s thought, Althusser argued, taught us that “one divides into two,” which he took to mean that, according to Marxism—
Leninism, nothing was absolutely pure, everything was divisible: “Division in the revolutionary sense is thus a good and not a bad thing. It helps to elevate man’s ideological conscience, it reinforces the unity of revolutionaries, it favors the development of the proletariat’s revolutionary cause and it makes society progress.”\textsuperscript{43} Similarly, Althusser in his remarks on Mao’s theory of dialectics stressed Mao’s emphasis on critique, division, and incompleteness: “The equilibrium and stability of the unity is temporary, apparent. The immobility of phenomena appears as a view of the spirit (but necessary to the formation of the concept) which should always be questioned. An absolute with a single pole, a single kernel, does not exist (metaphysics). It is the source of all errors.”\textsuperscript{44} Althusser’s Mao was, in other words, an early deconstructionist of metaphysics, of wholeness. Furthermore, he had understood the fundamental structural division of the subject, a division that Althusser stressed again and again, particularly in his ISA text. The mechanism of subjection responsible for the split but also for the construction of the subject was called ideology. As Althusser put it, in one of his index cards on Mao’s thought: “Mao identifies power and ideology. More specifically: system = power = ideology.”\textsuperscript{45}

In his reading of Mao as a structuralist \textit{avant la lettre}, Althusser also underscored his antihumanism. This is especially visible in a 1967 issue of the newsletter \textit{Cahiers de la Chine Nouvelle} that Althusser studied and extensively underlined. In particular, he highlighted the following sentences:

The \textit{renmin ribao} refutes the bourgeois humanitarianism preached by the Soviet revisionists. . . . For the Soviet revisionists, communism is the very incarnation of real humanitarianism. . . . This is one of the most vile slanders against the communist ideological system. Revisionist sirs, you should rather say that the communist ideological system is the ideological system most opposed to humanitarianism because it is the most incompatible with the humanitarianism of the land-owning classes and the bourgeoisie. . . . As president Mao has taught us, there is only a concrete human nature and not an abstract human nature. In a class society, the only human nature that exists is one based on class. . . . The kernel of the communist ideological system is the “collective concept” [by which] we understand the interest of the proletariat, the revolutionary people, the proletarian revolution. . . . The kernel of humanitarianism is egoism. . . . Humanitarianism was invented in the Renaissance (14th/16th centuries) and although it played an active and enlightening role in the struggle of freedom against the yokes of scholasticism, clericalism, and feudalism, it was hypocritical from the beginning. To fight against egoism means to fight against the concepts of private property and of personal interest. They are at the ideological origin of the manifestation and development of revisionism in our country. The great cultural revolution targets first and foremost the few party officials who have taken the road of capitalism. At the same time, it must resolve the question of man’s
world conception, eliminate bourgeois ideas and eradicate revisionism. . . .

Today, we rely primarily on ideological work.⁴⁶

Although the term used in the Chinese publication was *humanitarianism*, Althusser wrote in the margins “humanism.” It is unclear whether this can be attributed to a translation issue, but what is fascinating is Althusser’s explicit insertion of Mao in the humanist/nonhumanist Soviet and European debates, which as we have seen had been, by 1967, preoccupying him for a number of years.

The Chinese Cultural Revolution beginning in 1966 represented for Althusser the possibility of applying Mao’s thought, of putting it “into practice.” It constituted an “epistemological break” akin to Marx’s 1845 discovery of the structure of capital. Through the Cultural Revolution, Maoism could become a science: “The correct attitude is scientific: we need to analyze the roots of everything. We must only consider external manifestations as an avenue leading to a threshold that we will have to trespass to really seize the root of the problem. It is the only certain and scientific method of analyzing phenomena.”⁴⁷ As a *science*, the Cultural Revolution sought to recognize ideology and to resolve the nonantagonistic contradictions within Chinese society. Althusser developed this analysis of the Cultural Revolution in a 1966 text published in the *Cahiers marxistes-léninistes*, a journal edited by Althusser’s Maoist students and published by Maspero. Although the article was anonymous, Althusser eventually recognized it as his.⁴⁸ As he saw it, the Cultural Revolution was Mao’s answer to the “problem of the two roads” facing all socialist countries. This was a choice between the “revolutionary road, which led *beyond* [au delà] the obtained results, towards the consolidation and development of socialism, and then towards the transition to communism,” and the “road of regression: which brings us below [en deça] the obtained results, towards neutralization and political use, and then the domination and the economic ‘digestion’ of a socialist country by imperialism: the road of ‘regression towards capitalism.’”⁴⁹ To avoid this “regression,” Mao had opted for a massive ideological revolution designed to supplement the political and economic revolutions: “Its ultimate goal is to transform the masses’ ideology, to replace feudal ideology, by a new ideology of the masses, proletarian, and socialist—thus, to give to the socialist economic infrastructure and political superstructure, a corresponding ideological superstructure.”⁵⁰ “The future,” Althusser argued, “depended on the ideological. It is through the ideological class warfare that the fate (progression or regression) of a socialist country will be played out.”⁵¹

As such, Althusser continued, “the Cultural Revolution was neither an exaltation of the masses’ blind ‘spontaneism,’ nor a political ‘adventure.’ It was a measured decision from the Party which relied on a scientific
analysis of the situation, and hence on Marxist principles and practice.”

In the remainder of his essay, Althusser developed a definition of ideology that in many ways prefigured the 1969 ISA essay. In particular, he insisted on the issue of subjection: “The ideological is that which, in a society, distinguishes and cements, whether it be technical distinctions or class distinctions. The ideological is an objective reality indispensible to the existence of all societies.”

Even though ideology corresponded to the “lived” relations of individuals, it was neither individual nor subjective in nature: it corresponded to objective social facts. China, in other words, represented for Althusser a case study, a practical platform to refine the theory of ideology that he had been perfecting since *For Marx*. Althusser’s structuralist analysis of social and subjective formations was, I would argue, fundamentally linked to his reflection on Maoism.

**Practical Applications: The UJC (ml) and the Gauche Prolétarienne**

Despite his attraction to Mao and China, Althusser was never officially a Maoist in the sense that he never left the PCF. Much has been written about his unyielding commitment to the party that several of his students criticized and that is certainly paradoxical given the PCF’s war against his writings. However, many of Althusser’s students showed no hesitation in calling themselves Maoists. For these students, Maoism was an escape from the rigidity, the anti-intellectualism, and the Eurocentrism of the PCF. China offered them a forum in which they could “test” Althusser’s theories on contradictions, science, ideology, and antihumanism. As Althusser put it, his students turned his concepts into brochures. Until the 1960s, the main communist student group was the Union des Étudiants Communistes (UEC), created by the PCF after the war. Even though the students were given a certain degree of autonomy, the organization was essentially subordinated to the PCF. From 1950 to 1966, the tension between the UEC and the PCF grew as the students demanded more independence. They disagreed with the PCF on Algeria, Hungary, and de-Stalinization, and they criticized the party’s moralism, especially on sexual issues. In their official newspaper, *Clarté*, they discussed controversial themes such as abortion, contraception, and promiscuity, none of which were on the PCF’s agenda. In 1966, a group of students, many of whom were disciples of Althusser from the ENS, decided to split from the UEC to form the Union des jeunesse communistes (marxistes-léninistes), or UJC (ml). It was in the UJC (ml)’s official journal, the *Cahiers marxistes-léninistes*, founded in 1964, that Althusser’s text on the Cultural Revolution cited above was published. After its dissolution in 1968, many of the members of the UCJ (ml) split between the newly formed GP and Vive la révolution (VLR). All of these groups considered themselves Maoist.
According to Foucault, the PCF’s motto throughout the 1960s was “not here, not now, not you.” For Althusser’s students, Maoism offered the possibility of being “here and now,” of participating in the great historical revolution, of having “China in our heads.” Overall, the UJC (ml)’s interest in China was similar to Althusser’s. The students fought Soviet “revisionism.” They were seduced by Mao’s analysis of contradictions, by his antihumanism, and by the Cultural Revolution’s ideological war. Their goal was to “lead an intransigent ideological fight against bourgeois ideology and its revisionist accomplice, against the petit-bourgeois ideology, particularly pacifist, humanist, and spiritualist ideology.”

The revolution, they claimed, “depended on Mao Tse-Tung Thought.” As they put it in one of their first meetings, economic victory was insufficient: “The superstructure can greatly influence the infrastructure. On this question, President Mao has developed a Marxist-Leninist philosophy. Before him, Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin showed that the social being determined conscience and that the infrastructure determined the superstructure. Mao Tse-Tung has shown with brilliance the reverse action of the superstructure.”

More than Althusser, however, the UJC (ml) and especially the GP sought to reach the people, the “creative masses.” Some led investigations in factories and in the countryside to gain a better “scientific” understanding of the people. Others left school or took time off to work in factories. Robert Linhart, one of Althusser’s students, recounted his experience as a worker in the Citroën car factory in his 1978 book, L’établì. Similarly, in their meetings, the UJC (ml) and the GP discussed contemporary Chinese art, literature, film, and opera, which they saw as examples of the ideological work that Mao was calling for. For example, they praised the restructuring of the Beijing opera, which proved that “no art is beyond class and no art can constitute itself as an independent kingdom.” In one opera, The Harbor, the dockworkers of the Shanghai harbor worked to uphold the anti-imperialist fight of the people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The actors lived with the dockworkers for four months, and the opera was submitted to the dockworkers after it was finished so that they could evaluate it. This, the students argued, proved the “reactionary character of all conceptions of art as ‘finished.’” Similarly, the students analyzed the Chinese film From Victory to Victory, which, they suggested, was widely acclaimed by Chinese audiences: “We find in [the spectators] neither pacifism nor humanism because they know how to distinguish a just war from an unjust war, and because they know how to draw a clear demarcation between the class friend and the class enemy.”

Toward the late 1960s, the French Maoist students split between a more ascetic version of Maoism that argued for guerrilla violence (and even flirted with terrorism) and a more libertarian vein. While the for-
mer focused on Mao’s theses on war and imperialism, the latter saw in China a model of social and sexual liberation. In a tract titled “We Hold the Power: Let’s Change Life,” the Gauche Prolétarienne emphasized the nonauthoritarian nature of student-teacher relations in China: unlike France, “there isn’t on one side a professor who talks and students who listen on the other. Now students and professors can mutually instruct each other.” China, they claimed, had no private cars: people used bicycles and public transportation. Also, prior to the Cultural Revolution, it was forbidden to smoke in factories because of the fire hazard. This, however, was “a repressive measure against smokers, not an ‘ideological method.’ The Cultural Revolution changed this: workers built special rooms where they could smoke. Today, these oppressive regulations have been swept away.” Similarly, the students contended, abortion and contraception were legal in China: “There is no parental authority like there is here. Children can either take their father’s or the mother’s name. In marriage, the woman does not necessarily take on her husband’s last name, she does what she wants.” Whether or not these claims were true, they were clearly responses to a series of specifically French problems that concerned many students around the time of May 1968: car culture, education, smoking, feminism, and authority more generally. After May 1968, the references to China began to decline as most Maoist groups and publications focused primarily on France. China had been a crucial detour to rethink French politics and society. It had functioned as a flexible signifier to address some of the most contentious issues for French Marxism: culture, gender, and colonialism.

De-Maoization and the Turn to Human Rights

According to Althusser, ideology had no history. By this, Althusser did not mean to suggest that ideology was “transcendent to all (temporal) history” but that it was “omnipresent, trans-historical and therefore immutable in form throughout the extent of history.” Like the unconscious, ideology was a structural phenomenon, coexistent with subjectivity. But if ideology had no history, Althusser’s concept did have a history, a history that passed through China. More specifically, as I have argued, the problem of humanism was at the crux of Althusser’s critique of ideology, a critique that he elaborated through, or at least with, China. Many historians and political theorists have insisted on the importance of the colonial context for the development of European liberalism and capitalism. The genealogy I have traced here suggests that the intellectual history of structuralism and of Western Marxism is equally porous and equally global. Still, the question remains why China specifically emerged as this flexible signifier during this particular period of French history. Why
would China, usually imagined as ahistorical in the conventional Orientalist vision, serve as the privileged catalyst for French history, as the vehicle for the critique of traditional Marxism? To what extent did this enthusiasm for China function as a deflection of the main issue of French colonialism? What does this history tell us about the role of “China” as a French political fantasy?

To conclude, I would like to consider, very schematically, how this particular articulation of ideology, humanism, and China might also help us rethink the history of “de-Maoization” in France. Indeed, the mysterious disappearance of Mao’s chosen successor, Lin Bao, in 1971, the bitter succession crisis before Mao’s death in 1976, and the increasingly numerous and detailed accounts of the violence propagated by the Red Guards convinced many former Maoists to publicly and loudly renounce “China” in the late 1970s and 1980s. But just as the French fervor for Maoism had ultimately more to do with France than with China, its rejection was also a complicated product of the French political and intellectual context of that time. The vehement denunciations of Maoism (or “conversion narratives,” as Guy Hocquenghem described them) were a symptom of antitotalitarianism, the new philosophy that many former leftist intellectuals came to embrace in response to the PCF’s political decisions, to the controversial and much-discussed publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* in 1974, and to the general collapse of third-world revolutionary utopias.

Whether this move “from revolution to ethics” proved the failure or the success of 1968 radicalism, the concept of the human made an important return from the late 1970s on, through the new discourse on human rights. In this context, many former Maoists who in the 1960s had embraced antihumanism in their critiques of ideology became unconditional champions of humanism, the “common denominator” among all men. In conjunction, many of these ex-Maoists argued for the importance of the rule of law (*état de droit*), the necessary condition for the existence of human rights. Rony Brauman, for instance, who presided over the humanitarian nonprofit organization Médecins sans frontières (MSF) from 1982 to 1994, was involved with the GP in 1969. After volunteering as a doctor in southeast Asia and witnessing the humanitarian crisis brought about by the Khmer Rouge regime, Brauman joined MSF, which was founded in 1971 by several doctors, many of whom, like Bernard Kouchner, had been active in gauchiste politics. As Brauman put it in 1986, the success of MSF coincided with the “decline of ideologies, the abandonment of redemptive Messianisms.” It was during these “hollow years” (*années orphelines*) that human rights reemerged as a “vision of the world in which man becomes again the finality of every action.” As Philippe Sollers, the founder of *Tel Quel* and one of the most important “China”
enthusiasts during the 1960s, claimed, Maoism had been a necessary step in the rediscovery of human rights.

Jacques Broyelle, one of Althusser’s students and one of the former leaders of the UJC (ml), titled his 1980 mea culpa Apocalyphe Mao. Comparing the Chinese regime to the Soviet regime, Broyelle decried the work camps, the spread of famine, and the lack of political freedom. Along with Kouchner, Broyelle helped launch the operation known as “A Boat for Vietnam” in 1979, a widely publicized initiative designed to help the Vietnamese “boat people” refugees, which managed to bring together intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Raymond Aron who had occupied opposite political camps for years. Human rights, it seemed, could suddenly provide the kind of consensus that France had been missing. They were, in this sense, a “last utopia” that followed, as Samuel Moyn has persuasively shown, the collapse of alternative internationalisms, among which we can include third-worldism.67 If “China” had served as a vector in the development of an antihumanist philosophy and in the critique of ideology in the 1960s, it continued to occupy a central place in French intellectual life of the 1970s and 1980s as that which needed to be rejected for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law to flourish again.

Notes

All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

This essay is primarily based on the Maoist archives at the Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine (Fonds: Gauche Prolétarienne) and on Louis Althusser’s papers on China at the Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine. I am grateful to Cornell University’s Society for the Humanities for funding these research trips. I would also like to thank David Eng, Jason Frank, Ben Kafka, Frédérique Matonti, Teemu Ruskola, Shuang Shen, Judith Surkis, Caterina Toscano, and Claudia Verhoeven for their valuable criticism on this article.

1. Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, “Pamphlet contre les sinophobes,” in Politique Hebdo, February 24, 1972, 25. Macciocchi was engaged, by then, in extensive correspondence with Althusser. Their letters had been published as a book in 1969 and were translated into English in 1973 under the title Letters from Inside the Italian Communist Party to Louis Althusser. Macciocchi’s 1971 book Daily Life in Revolutionary China circulated widely within the French intellectual scene. She was also responsible for organizing the 1974 trip to China of various Tel Quel members including Julia Kristeva, Philippe Sollers, Roland Barthes, Marcelin Pleynet, and the Seuil publishing house editor François Wahl.


7. In Althusser’s archives we find two folders of notes and index cards on Mao’s writings (“Notes sur Mao Zedong,” Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine [hereafter IMEC], AL T2.A57-03 01 and 02) and two folders of Chinese propaganda from 1966–67 (IMEC, AL T2.A57-05 01 and 02).


10. Throughout this essay, I use the term structuralism rather than post-structuralism, which is usually the concept associated with the critique of ideology, humanism, totalization, centers, closed and stable meaning, and metaphysics. This is due to the fact that the term post-structuralism is rarely used in French. Although the term has in recent years “returned” to France after years of circulating in the American academic context, it was to my knowledge never used by Althusser or any of the other thinkers included in the nebulous category of French theory. For an analysis of this cross-Atlantic dialogue, see François Cusset, French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). Although Althusser did not even self-describe as a structuralist, his reading of Marx, especially in Reading Capital, is clearly informed by structuralism in the sense that he is interested in systems, structures, and their relation to one another. The difficulty of locating Althusser in either a structuralist or a post-structuralist camp is also perhaps another indication of how limited—and limiting—these categories ultimately are.


13. Ibid., 10.


16. Ibid., 7.


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21. Ibid., 21.
22. Ibid., 11.
23. Louis Althusser, “Marxism and Humanism,” in *For Marx*, 221; see also 10–11.


26. Althusser, *For Marx*, 23. Althusser blames this “theoretical vacuum” on French politics, and in particular on the fact that 1789, 1830, and 1848 were all “bourgeois revolutions.” He also blames French philosophy from Cousin to Bergson, because of its conservativeness, its “contempt for history and for the people, its deep but narrow-minded ties with religion” (25).

27. On the details of these debates, see Matonti, *Intellectuels communistes*, 31. See also Goshgarian, introduction.

29. Quoted in Pudal, *Un monde défait*, 76.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 227.
33. Ibid., 230.
34. Ibid., 232.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 238.
37. Goshgarian, introduction, xxii.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., 12.
52. Ibid., 11.
53. Ibid., 14.
54. This was one of the reasons for his split with Rancière after May 1968. See Jacques Rancière, La leçon d’Althusser (Paris: Gallimard, 1974). Althusser also discussed this in L’avenir dure longtemps, 254.
58. BDIC, F.Delta-Rés-576/7.
61. In this sense, my argument here is close to that made in Kristin Ross, Fast Car, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 157–65. According to Ross, the “death of man” effect that characterized much of French philosophy in the 1960s needs to be thought of in conjunction with decolonization and, more specifically, with the idea (propagated by Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, among others) that a “new man” was emerging in the third world.
63. On French antitotalitarianism, see Christofferson, French Intellectuals.
64. For two sympathetic (although quite different) assessments of this transition, see Julian Bourg, From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007); and Wolin, Wind from the East. For far more critical approaches, see Jean Birnbaum, Les Maocci: Un néoconservatisme à la française (Paris: Stock, 2009); and Hocquenghem, Lettre ouverte; and Ross, May ’68 and Its Afterlives.
65. For a good example of a justification of the rule of law as the “first condition to guarantee the existence of individual rights,” see Jacques Julliard, “Pour ne pas condurer . . . ,” in Le tiers monde et la gauche, ed. Jean Daniel and André Burguière (Paris: Seuil, 1979), 145.