

Richard Wolin

The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s.

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For historian and political scientist Richard Wolin, one of the foremost legacies of the 1960s is the recognition that the cultural is the political, and the aim of his book is to ‘indirectly’ capture the meaning of the emergence of cultural politics in France in this period by attending to the French ‘infatuation with Cultural Revolutionary China and...Mao Tse-tung Thought’ (xii). He does this first by reviewing French cultural attitudes in the 1960s, the events of May ’68, and the role played by various Maoist actors and groups in the events of May and the years that followed, and then goes on to examine in some detail the association with Maoism of some of France’s leading intellectuals: Jean-Paul Sartre, the *Tel Quel* group (primarily Philippe Sollers and Julia Kristeva), and Michel Foucault. The text concludes with some observations on the connection between the 1960s and what Wolin sees as the emergence of ‘associational democracy’ in France.

Throughout the introduction and first part of his book, Wolin reminds the reader why both established as well as neophyte leftists might be attracted to Maoism, as China offered an alternative to what was increasingly seen in the West as the undesirable version of ‘really existing socialism’ presented by the Soviet Union. And he makes clear that this attraction was especially tempting in France, as the French Communist Party (PCF) was dominated by unrepentant Stalinists who, for example, stood firmly behind the Soviet Union’s decision to crush the Hungarian uprising in 1956. For young leftists—and this was nowhere more true than among Louis Althusser’s students at the École Normale—Mao’s writings offered a legitimate alternative interpretation of Marxism to the discredited Soviet version, and this was even more the case after the Sino-Soviet split became more pronounced in the 1960s. With the proclamation of the Chinese Cultural Revolution in May 1966, Wolin charts how a fascination with all things Chinese overwhelmed Paris and the intellectual and cultural elite who lived there (Jean-Luc Godard’s *La Chinoise* is discussed as a paradigm case).

Two events dominate the narrative in Part 1: the ‘showdown at Bruay-en-Artois’ in 1972 following the brutal murder of a young working-class girl and the events of May ’68. What unites the two events in Wolin’s narrative is that while each sets up a clear class antagonism, both reveal the political ineptitude of the Maoist leadership. In the former, on Wolin’s telling, the arrest of a wealthy bourgeois notable, Pierre Leroy, produced among the Maoists a call for a ‘people’s tribunal’ because the bourgeois justice system could not be trusted to set aside its class interest and look only at the facts of the case. The problem here, according to Wolin, is that the Maoists turned the issue into a class war and continued to press their case long after questions about the Leroy’s possible innocence were raised. The Maoists’ political missteps in response to the events of May

'68 are even more damning: 'In a characteristic gesture of normalien arrogance, the Maoists dismissed the student revolt due to its deficient class character' (95). Rather than join the students in challenging the authority of the state, Maoist leader Robert Linhart ordered his members to remain on the sidelines, where most of them did remain until the workers joined the protests and PCF called for a general strike, at which point it became acceptable for the Maoists to engage themselves in the struggle. What stands out in Wolin's recounting of both events is the Maoists' dogmatic adherence to political principle as well as their inability to react either intelligently or pragmatically to developing events. These points are highlighted in a puzzling concluding 'Excursus' to Part 1 in which Wolin looks briefly at Alain Badiou's continuing and unrepentant adherence to Maoism. While acknowledging the odd fusion in Badiou of both Sartrean and Althusserian influences, Wolin highlights several of Badiou's more problematic refusals to distance himself from the excesses of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Although one might very well agree with much of Wolin says here about Badiou, concluding a discussion of the 1960s and 70s by examining Badiou's Maoist comments from thirty years later appears disconnected if not gratuitous in relation to the preceding 150 pages.

Where Part 1 of Wolin's text will be of interest to those wanting to learn about the history of Maoism and the Chinese temptation of the 1960s-70s, Part 2 may be of more interest to philosophical readers, as Wolin looks in some detail at the historical engagement with Maoism of Sartre, *Tel Quel*, and Foucault. In each case, the protagonists come under serious criticism, but the cases of Sartre and Foucault might be understood quite differently from how Wolin recounts their histories.

Sartre, Wolin tells us, was more or less a has-been by the time May '68 came around. His existentialism was passé, completely eclipsed by the structuralist critique of the subject. Following out the narrative suggested by François Dosse, Wolin agrees that May '68 was 'Sartre's Revenge' as the students both affirmed their individuality and desire while at the same time exemplifying the dynamics of a group-in-fusion as described in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Sartre is thus accorded pride of place, the only 'old guard' intellectual allowed to speak to the students occupying the Sorbonne, and he returns the favor by defending the students in *Le Nouvel Observateur* and *Le Monde* and interviewing student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit. Wolin then turns to Sartre's joining 'les Maos', as Sartre accepts the Gauche Prolétarienne's (GP) invitation to serve as the 'editor' of their paper *La Cause du Peuple* after the government arrested several of the GP editors and began confiscating entire print runs of the paper. Wolin is fair in his treatment of Sartre, acknowledging that his decision to support the GP was not opportunistic but based on a shared commitment to their revolutionary ideals: Sartre was explicit in not accepting all of the GP program, but he recognized that they were being persecuted by the authorities and he put the entire weight of his prestige (as well as a significant amount of money, his entire advance from Gallimard for *On a raison de se révolter* [219]) behind them, daring the government to arrest him as well. Wolin concludes the chapter on Sartre with a criticism of his justification of political violence and a fairly detailed account of the Sartre's controversial relationship with former Maoist Benny Lévy (who, under his Maoist nom de guerre Pierre Victor, was a leader of the

GP), who led Sartre to reflect on religion and Judaism in his final work, *Hope Now*.

When Wolin turns to Philippe Sollers, Julia Kristeva, and *Tel Quel*, he has an easier time making the case for the gross political mistakes of French intellectuals under the sway of Maoism. On Wolin's telling, under the strong editorial leadership of Sollers, *Tel Quel* began as an anti-Sartrean literary journal committed to the absence of political commitments, passed through a period of devotion to high structuralism, moved briefly to an association with 'the terminally sclerotic PCF' (261) which led to its dissociation from the events of May '68, and ended up in the early 1970s as a journal giving voice to Sollers and Kristeva's full-blown Sinophilia. Wolin's critique is blistering: Kristeva and Sollers emerge as narcissistic, opportunistic, and self-serving; they willfully ignore the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and maintain a dogmatic commitment to all things Chinese long after any reasonable political actor would have begun to see the errors of their allegiance. Along the way, Wolin also takes time to address several of the more problematic dimensions of Kristeva's feminism, questioning whether she is in fact a feminist at all.

When Wolin turns in the penultimate chapter to 'Foucault and the Maoists', both his recounting of the historical facts and his elaboration of Foucault's philosophical positions become most problematic. For Wolin, Foucault is, although he denies it, a structuralist who, although he missed the events of May while living and teaching in Tunis, returns to Paris to set up the philosophy department at the experimental university at Vincennes. His appointment was facilitated by his absence during May, and while lacking any political baggage might have been important to his selection, no mention is made of his long-standing relationship with Georges Canguilhem, who in fact extended the invitation on behalf of the Ministry of Education and also directed Foucault's 1960 *Doctorat d'Etat* on *The History of Madness*. According to Wolin, Foucault's need 'to establish his revolutionary bona fides' led to his 'recruiting gauchistes of all stripes for the philosophy department' (299), including his partner Daniel Defert, a GP militant (304), who facilitated his link with the Maoists. (Earlier in the text, we are informed that Badiou was one of a 'plethora' of Maoists selected by Foucault, although only three others are named, one of whom—Etienne Balibar—while a student of Althusser, is questionably included here among the Maoists [158].)

Wolin devotes several pages to Foucault's work with the *Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons* (GIP), which on his telling is peopled largely by Maoists—elsewhere we are told it was 'established...by Maoist militants' [370]—operating according to the Maoist model of the independent inquiry or *enquête*. Whether or not the GIP originated as Defert's idea, however, other accounts of the activities of the GIP set Foucault as both its founding and leading figure, and its primary goal of providing a means through which prisoners might be able to speak for themselves could just as easily be linked with Foucault's long-term project of giving voice to marginalized groups—the mad, the sick, the criminal, the homosexual—who have been denied access to the dominant discursive practices as to the Maoist *enquête*. In the remainder of this chapter, Wolin discusses Foucault's relationship (or its lack) with the *Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire* (FHAR) and suggests that Guy Hocquenghem's *Homosexual Desire* (1972) beat Foucault

to the punch, forcing him to rethink how he would pursue the project of a history of sexuality, before concluding, somewhat unjustifiably, that Foucault's 'progeny' emerge as the ex-Maoist 'new philosophers', most notably André Glucksmann, whose appearance and advocacy of human rights is the silver lining that eventually shines through the dark clouds of French Maoism.

This becomes the theme of the final chapter, which like the excursus on Badiou that ended Part 1, appears tacked on and disconnected in many ways from the preceding 350 pages on 'the wind from the East'. In fact, in its affirmation of 'associational democracy' and the commitment to human rights, the concluding chapter raises a couple of points that deflate the central theses of Wolin's book: on the one hand, we are told that by leaving Maoism behind, the young militants could turn in the 1990s to various social movements associated with the excluded—undocumented workers (*sans papiers*), the unemployed, and the homeless (366-7). But earlier, Wolin noted the 'strange disconnect between Badiou's uncompromising theoretical radicalism' and his defense of and commitment to these very same causes (166), which appears to indicate that abandoning or remaining committed to Maoism is unrelated to these social goals. Even more telling is an admission earlier in the final chapter, when Wolin notes that the Maoist students were almost all normaliens, which meant they were well trained 'in the classical texts of French humanism'. And for this reason, 'When all is said and done, for many student militants, Montaigne's *Essais* proved more influential than Chairman Mao's Little Red Book' (355). Why this sentence doesn't refute the central thesis of Wolin's book remains something of a mystery to me.

Wolin's book has apparently received several positive reviews. This will not be one of them, as I find the book flawed on several counts. For one thing, the writing is annoyingly repetitive, and there are numerous instances where Wolin repeats himself in more or less the same terms. We are told, for example, that Maoist Tiennot Grumbach was the nephew of former prime minister Pierre Mendes-France (96, 135), that Beauvoir accused Benny Lévy of '*le détournement du veillard*' for taking advantage of Sartre (222, 225 n91), that Sartre co-founded the newspaper *Libération* (16, 222; cf. 218), that Lacan 'patronizing[ly]' (193) and 'condescendingly' (251) told the students that they 'will find a new master!', and that Jacques Sauvageot was the lone exception to the four student leaders of the May movement being Jews (223, 352). There are also instances in which what we are told is inconsistent; for example, Lucien Goldmann is identified as a philosopher (188) and a sociologist of literature (247). Perhaps most annoyingly, we are told things that, while offered to make a rhetorically effective point, turn out not to be true at all. For example, when talking about the training and four-year stipends of the 'intellectual elite' at the *École normale*, Simone de Beauvoir is listed among the ENS graduates (117), when in fact she only took a few classes at the ENS and graduated instead from the Sorbonne. Elsewhere, while talking about the leadership of one of the Maoist student group's partiality for the Latin Quarter, Wolin notes the inconsistency between their meeting 'in a private room at the luxurious Hotel Lutétia' and their 'otherwise militant proletarian theoretical line'. While noting as well that the Lutétia is situated at the fashionable Parisian intersection of Sèvres-Babylone, anyone with a knowledge of Paris will surely be puzzled by Wolin associating this intersection

separating the sixth and seventh arrondissements with the fifth arrondissement Latin Quarter to which the Maoists were partial.

The above points are perhaps too picky, and their inclusion might be attributed to a faulty copy-editor rather than the author. A more significant criticism, however, concerns Wolin's tendency to hold many of the historical actors accountable for the consequences of their commitments when in fact those consequences could easily be understood to be other than what one might reasonably have expected at the time to happen. Hindsight is, indeed, 20-20, and Wolin rarely misses an opportunity to point out the undesirable consequences of those commitments. For example, had it been known at the time what would become of the Iranian Revolution, or what would transpire under the auspices of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, would Foucault or Sartre have taken the positions they did? As I read Wolin's ungenerous judgments as to the mistaken political choices made by some of the individuals discussed in his book, I find myself wondering if, thirty years from now, a narrative might be written about those who, in 2008, enthusiastically mobilized in support of Barack Obama's candidacy, holding them accountable for not anticipating that the Obama administration would fail to close Guantanamo, reaffirm the Patriot Act, invade Libya, and escalate the war in Afghanistan. Yet Wolin does effectively this when he dismisses Foucault's initial support for the popular revolt against the Shah in Iran, suggesting that rather than supporting an indigenous rebellion against a repressive leader who had come to power through a coup backed by the United States, Foucault was instead 'seduced and deceived by the lure of third worldism' (344).

More to the focus of the period in which Wolin is interested, what is largely missing in his appraisal of the political choices of Sartre, Foucault, and the Maoist activists is any serious discussion of the repressive, near police state in which some of these choices were made. GP activists and leftist journal were frequently imprisoned for little or no reason other than their political sympathies. The Paris police could be brutal, as H el ene Cixous can attest, as she has recalled being knocked unconscious while participating in a march in support of the GIP. Yet there is no mention of Foucault's participating in demonstrations to draw attention to the brutal beating, while in a police van, of *Nouvel Obs* journalist Alain Jaubert in 1971. To some, what would bring Sartre and Foucault together, for all of their political and philosophical differences—as for example, happened when they joined together to protest the treatment of Arab immigrants in the Goutte d'Or in November 1971—is less their na ive Maoist political commitments or even their shared political goals than their belief that the Paris police and the French state were out of control, and their willingness to put their prestigious positions and cultural capital to work drawing attention to the treatment of less powerful people who were not able to attract that attention on their own. (Sartre in fact had a history of doing this, and his earlier support of L eopold S edar Senghor, Franz Fanon, or the journal *Pr esence Africaine*, might be more generously interpreted as defending a non-Eurocentrism rather than empty third worldism.)

In the end, a more balanced and judicious evaluation of the events surveyed in Wolin's book could have been written. Fran ois Dosse is able to be critical without being

patronizing in his two-volume *History of Structuralism*, and both Dosse and Julian Bourg, in his *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought*, from each of whom Wolin draws much, have written accounts that are more historically interesting, informed, and accurate.

Alan D. Schrift
Grinnell College