

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 11 (February 2011), No. 47

Richard Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010. xiv + 391pp. Photographs, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-691-12998-3.

Review by Michael C. Behrent, Appalachian State University.

In one of the first studies on the topic, Christophe Bourseiller set out to recount what he called French Maoism's "mad story."<sup>[1]</sup> This would seem at first glance a fitting characterization of a movement which, as it flashed in the pan of leftist politics between 1966 and 1974, distinguished itself by such revolutionary antics as dispatching young philosophers to work in car assembly plants, stealing delicacies from Fauchon's in commando-like raids to distribute them in immigrant *bidonvilles*, and schizophrenic kidnappings in which corporate executives were held hostage with unloaded guns. That Maoist politics was a stomping ground for several figures who have risen to prominence in contemporary France (such as Serge July, the newspaper *Libération's* longtime editor, and the philosopher André Glucksmann) only adds to their exotic appeal.

This perspective, with its partly nostalgic, partly voyeuristic interest in the peculiar blend of extremism and earnestness that characterized the *soixante-huitards*, informs much writing on French Maoism, including studies by Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman, Paul Berman, and Bourseiller himself.<sup>[2]</sup> But while Richard Wolin's important and thought-provoking new book contains its fair share of winks and nudges when assessing the Maoists' political adventures, it takes a different and more stimulating approach: it contends that, for all their naïveté and confusion, French Maoists gave birth to a pathbreaking form of intellectual politics, one that knocked mandarins off their pedestals and attuned them to the passions and interests of civil society. Though Marxism was the Maoists' birthright, their legacy, Wolin argues, was their adoption, in a post-68 idiom, of the language of democracy and human rights.

Though *The Wind from the East* is a work of intellectual history, it is also a contribution to political theory. Over the course of his prolific career, Wolin has made a trademark of the polemical verve and moral seriousness with which he has denounced totalitarian and counter-Enlightenment tendencies in modern European thought. In *The Politics of Being*, he identified a commitment to National Socialism lurking in the inner riggings of Martin Heidegger's philosophy.<sup>[3]</sup> In *The Seduction of Unreason*, he traced postmodernism's disturbing fascist lineages.<sup>[4]</sup> Given his prior work, one might have expected Wolin to be withering in his appraisal of Mao's sophisticated apologists. Yet while he is unsparing when necessary, Wolin offers a remarkably balanced account of France's Maoist episode. Rather than considering French Maoism as a cautionary tale of intellectuals running amok, Wolin claims that it was primarily a "*constructive political learning process*" (p. 4)—a term borrowed from his philosophical hero, Jürgen Habermas. French Maoism, Wolin believes, was a political space in which a misguided, top-down ideology was retooled and upgraded, resulting in a surprisingly creative style of democratic politics. The hinge on which this transformation turned was the idea of "cultural revolution": while the notion in its Chinese iteration was steeped in "workerism" and incipiently terroristic, it spurred, in post-68 France, a productive critique of mainstream conceptions of gender, homosexuality, and deviance. Wolin writes: "Maoism, in its post-May incarnation, played the unsuspecting role of a way station or transmission belt, weaning intellectuals away from the dogmas of orthodox Marxism and exposing

them to an expanded definition of human emancipation” (p. 342). As a result, “French intellectual life was wholly transformed” (p. 4).

Wolin’s book is divided into two parts. The first tells French Maoism’s story, situating it within the broader historical context of the sixties. The second considers the Maoist activism of several prominent intellectuals. Part one, “The Hour of Rebellion,” begins at what would appear to be the ending, the notorious “Bruay-en-Artois Affair.” Following the murder of a miner’s daughter in a northern French town in 1972, the Maoist group La Gauche prolétarienne (GP), which was born in May ’68’s aftermath, launched a campaign against what it denounced as a class-based judicial system, intent on shielding the bourgeoisie from the working class’s thirst for justice. This incident, which precipitated the GP’s dissolution, disabused its members, Wolin believes, of their “delusory, eschatological image of the proletariat” (p. 38), marking an important stage in their “learning process.”

The remainder of part one is a condensed history of postwar France that aims to explain French Maoism’s origins and development. This is already well-explored ground, which Wolin covers by relying on secondary literature and familiar contemporary works. France in the sixties was, he explains, a society in which authoritarian politics and a traditional culture were being unsettled by unprecedented economic expansion and consumerism. The result of these tensions was May ’68. Yet even though Marxist terminology laced the rhetoric of student revolt, the legacy of the “events” was ultimately cultural: the goal was less proletarian revolution than “a grassroots transformation of interpersonal relations and living conditions” (p. 77). At this point, Wolin turns his attention to Maoism proper, from its germination in Louis Althusser’s seminar rooms at the École Normale Supérieure through its successive organizational incarnations. For Wolin, Maoism recapitulates the broader story of student activism in the sixties. What began as dialectics ended in libidinal politics.

Part two, “The Hour of Intellectuals,” contains the book’s most important and original material. Here, Wolin assesses the effects of Maoist activism on the political and philosophical projects of Jean-Paul Sartre, the *Tel Quel* circle, and Michel Foucault. Maoism, he maintains, effectuated a series of “paradigm shift[s]” (p. 178) in French intellectual life: from Leninist vanguardism to the celebration of civil society; from a “prophetic” to a “democratic” conception of political engagement; and (in some instances) from anti-humanism to *droit-de-l’hommeisme*. For Sartre, joining the Maoists was a way of abandoning his quixotic effort to reconcile Marxism and existentialism and to revive his earlier “philosophy of freedom.” It also paved the way for his late-career intervention on behalf of Soviet dissidents. Wolin contends that Maoism had a similar impact on Michel Foucault, despite his enormous philosophical differences with Sartre. In one of the most thorough assessments of Foucault’s political activism since James Miller’s *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, Wolin (with the assistance of Ron Haas, who co-wrote this chapter) argues that it was Maoism, and particularly the Groupe d’information sur les prisons (or GIP, which partially overlapped with the GP), that sensitized Foucault to the “microphysical” dimension of modern power relations. Yet as with Sartre, this activism ultimately allowed Foucault to reinvent himself as a “champion of democratic values” (p. 344) and human rights (notably in his endorsement of the *nouveaux philosophes*’ critique of Marxism and in his outspoken defense of the Polish trade union Solidarity). If the thesis of Maoism as “learning process” rings true in the case of Sartre and Foucault, Wolin makes little effort to apply it to Philippe Sollers and Julia Kristeva, the editors of the literary journal *Tel Quel*, whose brief enthusiasm for the Cultural Revolution was, in Wolin’s estimation, as shallow as it was totalitarian. Unlike the Bourbons, the *telqueliens* learned nothing while forgetting everything. Similarly, in an “excursus” in part one, Wolin also exempts the philosopher Alain Badiou from his “learning process” claim, on the grounds that his Maoism has remained stuck in a Leninist phase.

Despite the originality of his thesis and his judicious assessment of Maoism’s political fate, certain aspects of Wolin’s argument are not entirely convincing. This is true, firstly, of his account of Maoism’s impact on Foucault. To begin with, Wolin associates Foucault’s concept of “biopower” with his Maoist phase (in a chapter entitled “Foucault and the Maoists: Biopolitics and Engagement”). Wolin observes

that the GIP investigated “the more subtle, capillary modalities of biopower as Foucault had recently conceived them” (p. 305). Yet Foucault did not use the term “biopower” (and the related “biopolitics”) until 1974, while the GIP disbanded in 1972. Whatever the GIP was investigating, it was not biopower. Moreover, Wolin mistakenly conflates “biopower” with “discipline,” as his reference to the “capillary modalities of biopower” suggests. “Capillary” was a term that Foucault used to refer to “discipline,” a power form that rigidly molds the behavior of individuals.[5] Yet the point of “biopower” is that it is (as Foucault said in 1976) precisely “non-disciplinary”[6]: rather than micromanaging individual bodies, it administers populations as aggregates.

Greater sensitivity to Foucault’s intellectual evolution might have allowed Wolin to take full stock of the generally *philosophical* lessons that Foucault learned from Maoism. Wolin claims that Maoism taught Foucault to consider the “microphysics of power” rather than the juridical power embodied by the state. Yet well before becoming an activist, Foucault had studied the subtle power dynamics found in asylums and hospitals. What Maoism did offer Foucault was an alternative to the juridical model of power: war, and specifically the guerilla warfare tactics that Mao had theorized and practiced. French Maoism was rife with the rhetoric of guerrilla warfare (as in Alain Geismar and Serge July’s tract *Vers la guerre civile*). Thus in *Discipline and Punish* (an outcropping of his GIP activism), Foucault proposes to conceive power as a “strategy,” not a “property,” modeled on “perpetual battle” rather than a “contract.”[7] On this point, Wolin might have usefully consulted Foucault’s Collège de France lectures (which are entirely absent from his account), particularly the 1976 course: not only is it completely devoted to the military model of power, but it is here that Foucault first reflects on the inversion of Clausewitz’s famous aphorism (“politics is war pursued by other means”) that Mao had also pondered.[8] Such considerations might also challenge Wolin’s disputable contention that Foucault became a “committed *droit-de-l’homme*” (p. 342): little in the philosopher’s writings suggests that he ever saw the idea of human rights as anything more than a weapon that could prove tactically useful in particular political struggles.

A further problem concerns the relationship between French Maoism and May ’68. Wolin sees Maoism as a kind of synecdoche for the “spirit of May.” Yet as he acknowledges, many of the people he considers either were either absent from the events (for circumstantial reasons, like Foucault) or politically hostile to them (the UJC-ML and *Tel Quel*). Moreover, the playful attitude, the libidinal politics, and the taste for *autogestion* that Wolin associates with May ’68 have much deeper roots in Situationism and other leftist traditions than they do in Maoism. When Maoists did embrace these concerns, they were evolving away from the positions that had previously defined them. It would be interesting to conduct a quasi-anthropological study of what defines each of the French far left’s distinctive clans—Maoism, Trotskyism (in its various “flavors”), anarchism, Situationism, and so on. While Wolin has written one of the finest books on the subject, he dilutes Maoism’s uniqueness by blending it into the “spirit of May.”

Finally, Wolin’s claim that Maoism paved the way for the “associational democracy” that he contends France is today is questionable in several respects. First, by linking it to the French tradition of voluntary associations, Wolin essentially grafts Maoism onto the roots of a different political tradition: the Second Left. But there is little reason to believe that the program of *autogestion*, as elaborated most importantly by Pierre Rosanvallon at the CFDT in the seventies, would have been altered significantly if Maoism had never existed. Moreover, rather than championing society over the state, some former Maoists—such as Blandine Kriegel (known for her defense of the *état de droit*), Philippe Barret (an advisor to the neo-Jacobin politician Jean-Pierre Chevènement), and even André Glucksmann (an occasional champion of Gaullism)—emerged as outspoken defenders of French republicanism’s avowed statism, no doubt as a result of the universalist values that Wolin rightly ascribes to them. Furthermore, despite its partial integration into the socialist’s 1981 electoral program, *autogestion* is genuinely considered to have failed as a political project: France is hardly a society where employees control their workplaces. If there has been an anti-statist force in contemporary France, it has hailed from very different political shores: the “neoliberal” ideas that, whether explicitly or implicitly, influenced the

socialist *virage* of 1983, European construction, and the privatizations of state companies in the nineties. And this is one of the final issues that one would have liked to see Wolin tackle: the argument that, as Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello have maintained, May '68 played an important role in ushering in a "new spirit of capitalism."<sup>[9]</sup> That erstwhile Maoists could find themselves, decades later, working for the French employers' organization, like former GP activist François Ewald, and endorsing Nicolas Sarkozy, like Glucksmann, is surely not the whole story of May's legacy. But it deserves consideration all the same.

*The Wind from the East* contains a few minor stylistic and factual errors. Confusingly, in its frequent reference to Chinese figures, the text alternates between the Wade-Giles and Pinyin Romanization systems, even when referring to the same individuals, giving us both "Mao Tse-tung" (p. 109 and *passim*) and "Mao Zedong" (p. 271), "Lin Piao" (p. 155) as well as "Lin Biao" (p. 277). At times, the two systems are combined ("Deng Hsiao-ping" [p. 157] instead of "Deng Xiaoping" or "Teng Hsiao-ping"). Furthermore, Wolin incorrectly identifies (p. 156) Lionel Jospin as a former leader of the Parti socialiste unifié (he means Michel Rocard) and describes the CFDT in the seventies as a "Left-Catholic" trade union (p. 364), despite the fact that it was founded in 1964 to secularize what had previously been a "Left-Catholic" organization.

These reservations aside, *The Wind from the East* tells the story of the '68 generation with a much-needed awareness of the complexities of its intellectual odyssey. It is, in the end, a meditation of considerable depth on the formation of political judgments. As such, it is an important book, both within the field of French history and beyond.

#### NOTES

[1] Christophe Bourseiller, *Les Maoïstes. La folle histoire des gardes rouges français* (Paris: Plon, 1996).

[2] Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman, *Génération*, 2 vols. (Paris: Seuil, 1987-1988); Paul Berman, *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968* (New York: Norton, 1996); Bourseiller, *Les Maoïstes*. For a more nuanced appraisal, see Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).

[3] Richard Wolin, *The Politics of Being: The Political Thought of Martin Heidegger* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

[4] Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[5] Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 199.

[6] Michel Foucault, "Il faut défendre la société" (Paris, Seuil/Gallimard 1997), p. 215.

[7] Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 31.

[8] Foucault, "Il faut défendre la société," pp. 16-17. See also, idem, *La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 123. For Mao's discussion, see *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1966), pp. 58-59.

[9] Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005).

Michael C. Behrent  
Appalachian State University  
[behrentmc@appstate.edu](mailto:behrentmc@appstate.edu)

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172