

# Reason and revolt

## Guy Lardreau's early voluntarism and its limits

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Guy Lardreau has few rivals for the honour of being the most under-appreciated contemporary French philosopher.<sup>1</sup> A student of Louis Althusser at the École Normale in the late 1960s and a flamboyant figure in Maoist intellectual circles before and after 1968, he remains best known for his searing reflections on cultural revolution and its ideological recuperation in the sensational book he co-authored with Christian Jambet, *L'Ange* (1976).<sup>2</sup> Although he published on an unusually eclectic range of topics – his bibliography includes books on science fiction, Philoxenus of Mabbug, human rights, Deleuze, crime fiction, post-Kantian ontology, materialism, a dialogue on medieval history – the simplest way to present his work is as a consistent engagement with one of the central questions pondered by Rousseau, Kant and the German Idealists, a question that was then taken up by Marx and by what Lardreau will call the successive 'stages' of Marxism. This is the old question regarding the relation between necessity and freedom: how might a passage from one to the other be conceived as itself free – that is, as freely or voluntarily undertaken – rather than as imposed by natural or economic necessity, or as orchestrated by the 'cunning of history'? To evoke the formulation that concludes *L'Ange*, to what extent might the 'autonomy of revolt' be attributed a transcendental status (LA, 233)? And more concretely, if the Leninist and Stalinist stages of Marxism remain conditioned by a purportedly inexorable logic of history, is there a form of self-emancipation that might resist dialectical conversion into its opposite?

The specific version of this question that came to haunt Lardreau for much of his life concerns the quality of the volition at stake in such emancipation. 'How can something undertaken in order to make things better', he asks in a late essay, 'eventually take a turn for the worse – and this not because the will behind this undertaking became lazy or forgetful, but on account of this will itself?'<sup>3</sup> What must we understand about the *will* to initiate radical change,

if we are to avoid this turn for the worse which so often overcame modern political projects? Why did the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions culminate in 'disastrous and criminal failure'? What was it about these and related attempts to 'bend political power to the highest ends of reason' – the ends of freedom and equality, of a world without oppression – that doomed them to 'result in the necessary reversal of best into worst'?<sup>4</sup> Why does Terror, in the Jacobin sense, appear as an ineluctable corollary to the voluntary pursuit of happiness and virtue?<sup>5</sup>

What is it about the exercise of a specifically political will, in short, that appears to involve a literal contradiction in terms, and to condemn any project of deliberate and forceful collective self-emancipation to eventual collusion in mass crime?

Although this question only takes shape in Lardreau's work during the latter half of the 1970s (from which point it persists right through to his posthumously published text *Faces de l'ange déchu*), I hope to show here that its initial formulation can be traced to his first and most passionately argued work of philosophy, *Le Singe d'or* (*The Golden Monkey*, 1973). Although often dismissed as youthful extravagance, this book is not only Lardreau's most important contribution to radical politics; its central concerns also orient much of his subsequent philosophical trajectory. Quickly recognized as the most significant theoretical text to emerge from the Gauche Prolétarienne (GP) current of French Maoism in the early 1970s,<sup>6</sup> *Le Singe d'or* offers perhaps the most uncompromising affirmation of revolutionary political will to be published in France since Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1961). The best way to understand the subsequent movement of Lardreau's thought, furthermore, from the combination of defiant elation and ascetic withdrawal characteristic of *L'Ange* (1976) and the follow-up *Discours philosophique et discours spirituel* (1985) to the neo-Kantian 'legalism' of *Le Monde* (1978) and *La Véracité* (1993) is as an effort to salvage a version of his early voluntarism while avoiding the

apparent impasse of its initial articulation. In the process, Lardreau found himself obliged to reorient his understanding of the will from the domains of history and politics to those of morality and religion, such that what he gains by way of principled integrity he loses in terms of political actuality. At each stage in this trajectory, Rousseau remains a privileged interlocutor, though for very different reasons – first as the critic of scientific ‘progress’ and the proto-Maoist prophet of an egalitarian general will, and later as the introspective hermit who withdraws from the corrupting machinations of the public sphere.

Despite the undeniable complexity of its articulation, I think it is possible to summarize the essential twist in Lardreau’s trajectory in a single sentence: whereas his early work connects the will with the positive actuality of its realization (following Rousseau and Hegel), his later work severs this link in order to posit a fully negative conception of practical philosophy (following Kant). What persists across this trajectory is a ringing affirmation of revolt over submission, of freedom over necessity, of autonomy over any sort of alignment with or adaptation to an allegedly irresistible logic of economic development or historical evolution; what changes is the status of this rebellious freedom, its withdrawal from the domain of social reality in favour of a ‘real’ but strictly ‘unrealizable’ dimension of absolute prescription.

What Lardreau thus shares with the two other great post-Maoist philosophers of his day, Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou, is an adherence to the logic of an *interrupted* or deflected fidelity to the ideals of May ’68 and the Cultural Revolution. Unlike so many of their contemporaries, all three remain committed to the principles of equality, justice and the validity of popular revolt, but they found strikingly different ways of upholding them. Through his contributions to *Révoltes Logiques* in the mid- and late 1970s, Rancière responded to the crisis of French Maoism by shifting his historical focus, by turning back to those moments of the nineteenth century when popular protagonists might be more easily identified with the role of insurgents against top-down authority and mandarin disdain. From the early 1980s, Badiou began to preserve his fidelity to Maoism by detaching instances of egalitarian revolt from the broader movement of history altogether – that is, by configuring them in terms of the consequential logic of an unpredictable event. Lardreau’s strategy came to involve a retreat from both historical reality and political temporality *tout court*.

All of Lardreau’s work can be read as an attempt to rid philosophy of what he sees as its ‘principal enemy’ – ‘the plague of Stoicism’, and the myriad versions of passivity and spiritualist resignation (through to Spinoza, Bergson and Deleuze) that he associates with it.<sup>7</sup> Over time, however, Lardreau’s commitment to an insurgent freedom becomes both more radical and more abstract. The more unconditional the affirmation that sustains it, the more distant it becomes from the conditions that might enable its implementation. The more Lardreau contemplates freedom, the less he becomes a partisan of actual emancipation.

I  
Although *Le Singe d’or* is not an easy book to read its argument is easily distilled.<sup>8</sup> Everything turns on the inaugural assertion of Mao’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, endowed here with all the authority (and limits) of a revelation: *on a raison de se révolter*.<sup>9</sup> Although automatically condemned by the guardians of the established order as wrong, it is always right for the people to rise in revolt.<sup>10</sup> Revolt is ‘the highest form of life’. Debate regarding the status of Marxism itself remains worthwhile only in so far as it affirms ‘the people’s revolt because it is necessary, and necessarily right and just’ (SO, 24). Revolt and reason thus figure as opposite sides of one and the same coin, and the only self-evident certainty Lardreau is prepared to recognize here is that ‘people do not tolerate oppression’.<sup>11</sup>

If it ‘cannot be wrong to revolt’ (SO, 100), if reason is itself revolt, then at least four consequences would seem to follow as a matter of course.

First of all, negatively, there is then no ‘reason’ for things simply to be the way they are, or the way they have been, let alone to be the way they have always been.

If thus far there has always been oppression and injustice, and if up to the present moment our world has always been structured in dominance, that is no reason for assuming that a world without oppression or domination is impossible (SO, 228–9; LA, 153). Here we have a radical version of Hume’s thesis, so to speak, in a sense not so far removed from that recently proposed by Quentin Meillassoux:<sup>12</sup> from what has been hitherto, no automatic inferences can be drawn regarding what is likely to be in the future, or what should be in the present.

If reason is a matter of active revolt rather than of abstract logic or immanent necessity, furthermore, then there is an essential difference in principle

between emancipatory struggle against every form of oppression, on the one hand, and, on the other, an apparent mandate for mere class supremacy as dictated by the apparent logic of economic development. Reconstruction of the latter, even if designed to vindicate the ‘inevitable’ triumph of the proletariat, is perfectly compatible with an orderly succession of socio-economic modes or configurations, an inexorable sequence in which ‘everything is in its proper place’ (SO, 126). Lardreau vigorously rejects, therefore, every version of the orthodox Marxist or Leninist argument that capitalism, and the full development of capitalist contradictions, is itself, for the oppressed themselves, the experience of any sort of fulfilment or necessity. Lardreau rejects in particular Lenin’s quasi-Taylorist argument that the capitalist factory system provides a much needed form of socio-economic training and discipline, such that capitalism itself might come to figure as the ‘educator’ of the oppressed, as if capitalism alone might ‘instruct them, lend them power and will, and teach them to struggle against oppression’ (SO, 99). The Luddites were right to revolt against the imposition of the factory system for the same reason that subsequent generations of workers were right to reject the logic of wage labour: at each successive phase of its exercise, revolt has its own reasons and its own capacity for renewal; it is not derivative of any deeper determination or of any more material cause (SO, 102). As a rule, genuine or cultural revolution ‘has no other “material base” than oppression as such, and the mechanism of its causality consists entirely in the logic whereby “where there is oppression, there is resistance”’ (LA, 92).

Hence a third and more obviously proto-Kantian consequence of our equation of reason and revolt: it applies only in *practice*, rather than in theory. The exercise of reason is not a matter of abstract logic or of natural, transhistorical norms, but rather of a *capacity* (*Vermögen*) or readiness to revolt. In each case, the decision depends on a neo-Nietzschean exercise in political psychology, a test or trial which turns on the question, in the domain of politics as much as that of sexuality: ‘do you feel strong enough to break the history of the world in two?’ (SO, 229; cf. 127). Do you accept that there is a reason for the organization of our lives – our bodies, our families, our societies – to be and to remain the way they are? Or are you willing to do what it takes to remake them? Such a ‘psycho-political’ approach to the question of revolt further orients Lardreau’s answer to a related question, the question of the *actor* or agent of revolt, the question that might be posed, again in

neo-Nietzschean terms, as ‘the one who revolts’, the one who wills revolt rather than reaction or stability. Compared with more orthodox readers of Marx, let alone Lenin, Lardreau is remarkably insouciant about questions of class and class composition. If it is the masses, the people, the oppressed or ‘the wretched [*les gueux*]’ who make history, it is *because* these actors revolt against privilege and oppression. The action would seem to induce the actor. What validates Marxism, during each of the active ‘stages’ of its development, is simply the fact that it grounds itself in the ongoing ‘revolt of the people’, understood as a process *en acte* (SO, 24).

A fourth consequence of the equation of reason and revolt is that it allows us to distinguish between two very different kinds of historical rationality; that is, for the affirmation of a historical rationality irreducible to any *science* of history (any attribution of an immanent progress to history). In *Singe* Lardreau appeals without apology to Hegel’s authority on this point, in order to affirm against Kant his ‘central thesis ...: there is only history, or again: things don’t exist’, other than as fragile, evanescent coagulations of historical forces (SO, 187). Everything is historical, however, only to the extent that history might itself be understood simply as the temporal dimension of revolt (and thus as the *actuality* of reason), rather than as any sort of orderly progression or immanent teleology. ‘If then I refuse any idea of meaning or direction [*sens*], as a form of progress or regress’, Lardreau explained a year after *Singe* was published, ‘I nevertheless maintain that there is a single signification of History; or again, that histories [in the plural], as histories of the singular, scattered histories, are ordered by a single motor: the struggle against oppression.’<sup>13</sup> History does not figure as an extra-subjective dimension that might determine the actions of those actors empowered to ‘make’ it, and proletarian revolution as Lardreau understands it does not promise to build on the past achievements and historical heritage of the bourgeoisie. ‘The ideology of progress [is] the origin of all that is most reactionary in Marxism.’<sup>14</sup>

## II

Attribution of historical rationality to emancipatory revolt rather than to order or necessity further orients the main polemical thrust of *Le Singe d’or* – namely, a full-on attack on the authority of science and its appeal to neutral or eternal ‘truth’, an attack that makes Jacques Rancière’s celebrated critique of Althusser’s scientism (published a year after *Singe*) look mild by comparison.<sup>15</sup> Science separates

contemplative over productive life, and privileges the dispassionate insights of the former over the practical urgency of the latter. Science as such is an integral part of the ‘world of oppression’, Lardreau argues, and ‘all science is science against the people. Far from learning from them, we should despise scholars [*les savants*]’ (SO, 89). Equally despicable is any conception of the proletariat conceived in terms of the incarnation of science or the ‘realization [*Verwirklichung*] of philosophy’;<sup>16</sup> that is, any conception of a revolutionary actor grounded not in the revolt it freely and knowingly undertakes but in the underlying necessity, authority or *order* it is supposed to represent. If the proletariat merely comes to figure as the ‘class whose interests fuse in advance with the maximum development of the productive forces’, then it simply ‘represents the party of science’ (SO, 60) and to that extent it figures as a bulwark against revolutionary disruption, rather than the reverse.

To recover the rebellious spirit and purpose of Marxism is thus to reverse the process that converted it into a science, the process that began with Marx’s economic writings and that soon became systematic with the Second International, thanks especially to Kautsky, Lenin and then Stalin. The concern of such scientific socialism is less the justice of voluntary insurrection than an adequate understanding of the causal forces that appear to ‘necessitate’ such revolt and to lend the imminent self-destruction of capitalism, in Marx’s fateful phrase, ‘the inexorability of a natural process’.<sup>17</sup> The preliminary to any would-be scientific approach to political activity is thus a refusal to see it as *active*, precisely; that is, a refusal to treat it in terms of ‘freedom, the will of human beings, in brief, as political action’ (SO, 84 n1). Instead, what is determinant is the more or less inevitable unfolding of successive modes of production, such that each new mode emerges smoothly from the one that begot it, in keeping with the quasi-obstetric sequence of unfolding that Lardreau dubs *la Gigogne*, for short (SO, 84 and *passim*). Adapted from a version of Hegel’s negation of the negation, the ‘birth’ of a new mode, as the Marxian metaphor suggests, is an essentially natural process that operates independently of the will of the actors involved, in keeping with its scientifically verified telos, the development of the forces of production. Marxism is thereby reduced to the study of socio-economic necessity, until it figures as ‘a necessary discourse on necessity, guaranteed by Science’ (SO, 84). Stalin’s insistence on the iron laws of historical determination simply indicates that, ‘as usual, [he] was nothing

more or less than a good reader of Marx and of Lenin’ (SO, 223 n.a).

Recovery of Marxism as a discourse of revolt further requires an appreciation of the historicity of this discourse itself; that is, an awareness of the way that the tension between its revolutionary or populist and reactionary or scientific aspects plays out as a process marked by specific steps or *stages* (a concern that justifies the subtitle of the book). ‘There are stages [*étapes*] of Marxism because there are eras [*époques*] of history’, and history is organized in periods or eras because material conditions and working practices do not just gradually evolve but proceed by leaps and breaks, which after periods of struggle and confusion render those of the previous era obsolete (SO, 103). It doesn’t matter, Lardreau argues, whether from the perspective of a scientific observer the historical sequence of stages follows the logic of *la Gigogne* or not; what matters is that every act and discourse of revolt is of a piece with its moment – that is, its *passing* moment. The only time of revolt is the present, and it proceeds by breaking with the previous present. What persists, then, across each of these various stages, is simply the logic of ongoing revolt itself, and a new stage takes shape if it manages to find its own distinctive way to insist once again, for its own place and time, that *on a raison de se révolter*: this is the only ‘universal truth’ a Marxist should recognize (SO, 106).

That everything is historical thus means that what may affirm and strengthen revolt at one time may subsequently turn against it in another, and if (following Rousseau, Nietzsche and Foucault) Lardreau relies on genealogy as his means of critique it is because his chief targets are anachronism and ossification. The Luddites made the most of one moment, the Communards another. Lenin himself deserves the greatest respect as a man of *his* time, as the leading figure of the *second* great stage of Marxism. In the wake of 1917, however, the consolidation of Leninism as a new orthodoxy was quickly appropriated by the reactionaries who come to dominate the new social order. Respect for Lenin as a revolutionary demands criticism of Leninism as a dogma (SO, 112), and today the remnants of an ossified Leninism are an obstacle to the *current* and living stage of Marxism, *la pensée de révolte de notre temps* – that is, Maoism.

In the light of the ongoing Cultural Revolution in China and its affirmation in some other parts of the world, Mao’s thought no longer figures as a revision of Leninist Marxism, but as a properly new stage, a *third* stage in the Marxian affirmation of revolt,

unavoidably bound up in relations of struggle and contestation with partisans of the previous phase.<sup>18</sup> Mao's insistence on immediate and unconditional equality, his confidence in the masses and their ability to 'systematize', his affirmation of popular experience and insight, his distrust of authorized knowledge, his critique of bureaucratization and of resurgent oligarchy and privilege within the Party, and so on, all serve to historicize and to solve the problems inherited from Leninism – and thereby to consign both these problems and their source to the past. Maoism doesn't build on, improve or enrich an outmoded Leninism. As a rival account of revolt, grounded in the present era, it breaks with and replaces it (SO, 106 n1). In particular, the Maoist stage marks a full-on assault against the privileged figure of Leninist 'science', of the 'professional revolutionaries' who positioned themselves as the 'subject supposed to know' (SO, 121). The priority now is simply to remove the obstacles that block or divide the consolidation of popular knowledge, itself the source of all political knowledge.

### III

Across the old arguments that continue to pit freedom against necessity and the will against intellect, few books have come down so forcefully on the side of an emancipatory voluntarism as *Le Singe d'or*. Lardreau's insistence that everything is historical is itself derivative of the more fundamental principle that history is the result of what people have willed it to become, either through acquiescence in or revolt against the status quo. This applies to *everything*, in the sense that the domain of voluntary transformation is not merely one sphere among others, or one particular subsphere of a more universal one; and it *applies* to everything, or can be made to apply to everything, in so far as the sole 'locomotive of history' is popular revolt.

Lardreau's book cannot avoid addressing, then, as its central dilemma, the question raised by virtually every great thinker in the post-Kantian (and of course post-Marxian) tradition: 'how to reconcile freedom, the will of human beings ... and economic necessity?' (SO, 84 n1). Or again, in a more exuberant rhetorical key:

For us, everything depends on knowing whether the revolution is conceived in keeping with the necessity of a *gigogne*, which renders it similar to so many other sequences in the past, or whether, taking it seriously, and knowing that what is at stake in the revolution is to storm the heavens and

take them by assault, to construct for the first time in history a society without oppression, a new humanity, we feel strong enough to break the history of the world in two. (SO, 145)

Rejecting any economistic understanding of capitalist development as 'the necessary machine of freedom' (SO, 99), Lardreau insists that if it is to prevail and endure, the movement from imposed necessity to an assumed freedom must itself be freely undertaken. If, 'outside of people, independently of their will, history unfolds through the endlessly renewed contradiction between the mode of productive and the productive forces', then the domain of history is turned upside down: from the sphere of voluntary self-determination, or the 'realization of freedom', it is transformed into a quasi-mechanical process and 'appears as implacable as nature itself' (SO, 84). By contrast, Lardreau's insistence that 'history is the whole of the real' only holds good to the extent that the 'motor' of this history is indeed the deliberate 'struggle against oppression', which proceeds in keeping with the further assumption that 'the masses know what they want or will [*veulent*], that they indeed desire what they desire'. The people will what they will, in the absence of any neo-Hegelian providence, any theodicy, any cunning of reason that might manipulate their desires or behaviour (SO, 188). Revolution is not the actualization of sub-voluntary reason, of a 'real' reason beneath the domain of lived experience and motivation, but is itself – in terms that already prepare the way for Lardreau's subsequent turn to Kant's moral philosophy – the exercise of reason in practice, one's *own* reason expressed through a decisive will and sustained by desire and faith:

To will the revolution rests on a pure commitment [*parti pris...*], it is a pure wager, which appears thoroughly unreasonable, and which all the evidence appears to confound: although there has always been oppression, it is the wager that nevertheless it will not always be so, and that the millennial struggle will one day be victorious. And this because, as with Pascal's wager, there is on the one side everything to gain, and on the other nothing to lose. The revolution is a work of faith. Once we have banished necessity and truth, we can grasp the new meaning of that Kantian formula from which we set out: dare to think. This is no small audacity. (SO, 89)

Rather than scientific explanation and its 'truth', what underpins an understanding of the world is here the position we adopt with respect to the basic,

constitutive, transhistorical relation of oppression: for or against? If everything is historical, then the fate of a world hitherto structured in relations of dominance and oppression depends not on the inevitable development of pseudo-natural causal mechanisms, but on the balance between insurgent and reactionary forces. What is here determinant, in the first rather than last instance, is the power of a collective will to revolt against oppression, as inflected through its relation with the powers that oppose it.

Appreciation of the qualitative difference between an actually 'general' and a merely majoritarian will is one of the several reasons why Lardreau calls here for a 'return to Rousseau', and why Rousseau figures, alongside Mao, as Lardreau's most important interlocutor in *Le Singe d'or*, indeed as a genuine kindred spirit (SO, 214). Lardreau doesn't just embrace Rousseau's critique of science, progress and his refusal of any natural or extra-historical basis for inequality and injustice (SO, 204, 235). From a Rousseauist perspective, what enables social change is not a developmental logic that might orient and thus necessitate history from within, but the 'simple', willed process of transformative action itself. Change is first and foremost a matter of virtuous volition. Above all, then, Rousseau anticipates for Lardreau the popular-voluntarist dimension of Maoist political practice (and, as he might have added, the practice affirmed by contemporaries like Fanon, Che and Castro). 'Only a politics of the general will, which refuses the disaggregation of the People into a mass of represented individuals ..., can put an end to inequality.'<sup>19</sup> Where one exists, a general or popular will is the immediate incarnation of law-giving power, in its self-constituting capacity as a collective actor. On this score, Rousseau breaks with the whole early-modern, natural-law account of the state that posited sovereignty as in principle distinct from the *persona* (be it monarch or people) who might best 'represent' it or act on its behalf. The Rousseauist or Jacobin alternative is to affirm the collective actor per se as sovereign: the people constitute themselves as sovereign not because they are best placed to act 'like' a sovereign power but because their collective capacity for political action and social transformation itself directly invests them with such power. Following Rousseau's lead, the only way to resolve the vexed relation between the people and their government, or between the masses and the party, is to 'treat the Party, its theory and its programme, as the pure creation of the masses, animated by no other life than the one they breathe into it'. The goal is

thereby to reduce 'entirely the person of the state to the People themselves – and, more precisely, to the People in arms. Here again ... it's Rousseau to whom we should return, Rousseau who sought to think, properly, the sovereign People and not the sovereignty of the People.'<sup>20</sup>

This point goes to the heart of Lardreau's early Rousseauism. What is essential is the constitution of the people as an actor that can indeed impose its sovereign and insurgent will, that has the capacity to revolt against injustice, and not the constitution of an orderly state that might then include the people as one of its legitimate components. The crux of Rousseau's political voluntarism is his conjunction of the will with such autonomous *capacity*, the capacity to realize a consciously chosen end or purpose, free from coercion or submission to another's will.<sup>21</sup> 'The truly free man', as Rousseau puts it in *Émile*, 'wills only what he can do, and does what pleases him [*ne veut que ce qu'il peut, et fait ce qu'il lui plaît*].' Such is Rousseau's 'fundamental maxim',<sup>22</sup> which he affirms in keeping with his most basic 'article of faith': 'there is no true action without will.'<sup>23</sup> *Vouloir* and *pouvoir* must be thought and practised the one through the other. Versions of this conjunction of will and capacity recur across the revolutionary-voluntarist tradition that Rousseau helped to inspire, every time a figure like Trotsky, Gramsci or Che comes to recognize that 'whoever genuinely wills an end must also will the means', and that to will the means is to acquire the ability to make use of them.<sup>24</sup>

#### IV

As Lardreau himself soon came to realize, however, the one-sided approach that *Singe* adopts with respect to history, science and truth simplifies and undermines its account of political action and popular revolt, and prepares the way for what is perhaps the most significant and far-reaching break in his philosophy – the break between an account of the will, on the one hand, and its capacity for realization or actualization, on the other.

The more history is driven forward by the sole impetus of revolt, Lardreau recognizes, the more the present burns its bridges with the past. Every true revolutionary seeks liberation from historical memory.<sup>25</sup> As the most revolutionary of the three stages of Marxism, Maoism is thus 'infinitely' more distant from Lenin than Lenin was from Marx – and for Lardreau, this confirms a sort of 'law that ensures that the further Marxism moves away from the old world, and shakes it off, the more its metamorphoses



take the form of absolute repudiations' (SO, 162). The more unconditionally one commits to revolt, the more ready one becomes to split the world's history in two (cf. 229). At the limit, Lardreau speculates, what may survive such a break is an 'amnesic humanity', a humanity without historical memory, if not a humanity without libraries (SO, 127). But what then remains of 'history' itself, in the absence of historical memory? How might we think of distinct 'eras' or 'stages' of history, complete with distinct modes of producing and distributing things, on the sole basis of revolt?

Before it can help split the history of the world in two, *Singe* has to split the notion of history itself in two, between history as revolt on the one side and history as socio-economic change on the other. What is not resolved is the relation between these two dimensions, other than by tacitly subsuming the one under the other, by recasting the former as the animating spirit of the latter. As Hegel's work demonstrates with compelling force, however, any such conflation of freedom and necessity can only work, in the end, in the interest of necessity. Lardreau's pointed though strained fidelity to Hegel's historical 'optimism' already indicates something of the price it will oblige him to pay. It is no easy trick to combine affirmation of revolt with an appreciation of that 'deep Hegelian optimism' which recognizes that *c'est*

*bien ainsi*. What is, is good, 'for spirit never loses its way, and always does everything for the best ... Even if the revolution comes to freeze up, spirit never gets lost' (SO, 28). If Hegel's *Geist* never goes astray, this is because it is itself the principle of the world it traverses. Hegel may frame his conception of politics around an account of the will, and arrange his conception of history as the realization of freedom, but this realization is itself driven by its own immanent logic; once the will is considered not as a capacity to change something external to it but as an aspect of a single field of reality, then as far as any actual political actors are concerned they are free only to align themselves with the force of necessity (or to be discarded in the oblivion of contingency). The unity of freedom and necessity is ultimately consistent only with the 'freedom' of an absolute or God-like actor.

The problem with Lardreau's early voluntarism, in short, is that it is not sufficiently committed to an account of political will as a self-determining *capacity* in the broadly Rousseauist sense – that is, as an actual, historically determinate set of collective abilities, specific to the forms of association and struggle of their time. What Rousseau offers is an account of the process whereby a political will might *generalize* and consolidate its capacity to remake society, in line with collectively assumed principles of freedom and equality – and what Marx will add

is a more historically informed consideration of the way that human powers or capacities (*Vermögen*) take shape over historical time, how our capacity to work (*Arbeitsvermögen*) is both enhanced and alienated, and how we might impose the political conditions that alone might liberate such capacities from command and coercion. Lardreau's *Singe*, by contrast, pays little or no attention to such processes, and instead posits an already-generalized actor, with an already-absolute will: the people or 'the masses', whose historical being is exhausted by the exercise of permanent revolt. Lardreau rejects both the category of the individual (as a function of capitalist exchange and its representational state) and the historical process that might constitute a political class (a variant on bourgeois 'progress'); he is left with the abstract category of the masses, as the immediate incarnation of justice and revolt. In other words, he is left with an actor whose action is itself effectively automatic or *involuntary*, a political reflex. The masses invariably revolt against oppression, and this defines them.

In the end, Lardreau's early work depends on 'an act of faith in the thinking of the masses in revolt' (SO, 89). So long as it is possible to maintain that 'all intelligence comes from the masses', that 'the masses alone are capable of systematizing', that 'the masses are never mistaken', that they always-already understand their desire, that their will is expressed without any need for critical reflection or 'scientific' analysis (SO, 26, 122, 124), and so on, so then it might seem that Lardreau's act of faith is a safe bet. It involves, admittedly, recognition of a difference between what the masses might currently think and want, in a world that oppresses them, and what they might think in so far as they rebel against its dominant ideology. Oppression affects the masses only as far as they can be led, temporarily, to 'think outside themselves; their own thought, the thought of their oppression, encounters no constraint other than the external one of interdiction', and remains 'in no sense a thought of servitude, but a pure thought of revolt, a pure thought of history'.<sup>26</sup> The difference is enough, however, to oblige Lardreau to recognize that 'the thesis: all thought comes from the masses, is correct only if we understand: the revolutionary masses', who may not always coincide with 'the fundamental masses' (SO, 26) or the people in general. But since the will of the masses is *virtually* revolutionary as a matter of course, Lardreau sees no need to linger over the old (and eminently Rousseauist) problem of the political 'educator'. The masses need no tutor or *législateur* to usher them into the age of political

reason, and still less do they need to internalize a knowledge that is formulated outside them, since they are already reason incarnate.

Of course, Lardreau's investment in the untutored instincts of the masses is only presentable as a revolutionary theory so long as the masses hold up their end of the bargain, and perform as expected. Precisely because Lardreau's account of political will is coupled less to a capacity for realization (following Rousseau) than to historical realization or actuality itself (following Hegel), so then his position here commits him fully to the actuality of his own historical moment – the seemingly victorious moment of the Cultural Revolution. What allows Lardreau to claim that the time has come to 'relearn how to think' is his confidence that 'humanity is indeed in the process of escaping from the world of the oppression of man by man. Thought [*la pensée*] in its entirety is turning upside down. This is what is happening today in China. China is what is closest to us' (SO, 72–3). As Lardreau would observe with retrospective clarity a couple of years after the dissolution of Gauche Prolétarienne, while it lasted its defining experience was 'this absolute certainty that not only was revolution possible, but we were in the process of making it happen', and that victory was only a matter of time.<sup>27</sup> It was the actual triumph of new thinking in and from China, likewise, that underwrites Lardreau's project to recover from the wreckage of Leninist scientism

the pure spirit of revolt. It's this spirit that we want to retrieve. And no doubt we want this simply because we can do this, because we no longer have that need, which Marx had, to lend the force of necessity to such a fragile hope; because although we are without certainty or truth we are nevertheless more confident [*assurés*] than him; because the thought of my time has not finished rejoicing in what the Cultural Revolution promises us. (SO, 88)

Jubilation, however, is indeed finite by definition. If Rousseau and Lenin are men of their moment, so too must be Mao and Lardreau themselves, and it is Lardreau's historical misfortune to have arrived at this insight at more or less exactly the time when its moment expired. Just as the revolutionary enthusiasm of *Singe* is carried by the apparent zeal of the *peuple en lutte*, so too the chastened anti-revolutionary argument of *Le Monde* is 'constrained' by the need to take stock of the historical consequences of actually existing Maoisms over the mid-1970s (LM, 20).

The historical confidence of *Singe* holds only so long as it remains possible to maintain that revolt, far



from being a matter of rare insurrection or ephemeral enthusiasm, is instead a historical and ongoing constant.<sup>28</sup> Lardreau's initially uncritical identification with the will of the masses leaves him at a loss once the masses veer away from their expected historical course, whether it be to the right (as in mid-1970s France) or left (as in Cambodia). As the radical mobilization in French factories began to subside, after 1972, the dwindling Gauche Prolétarienne struggled to find a foothold in the shifting political terrain. In 1973, the year *Singe* was published, Gauche Prolétarienne found no answer to the conundrum posed by the quasi-'liberated' workforce at the Lip watch factory, once they indicated a willingness to work with rather than against the logic of capitalist exchange.<sup>29</sup> More to the point, faced with the eventually undeniable evidence of Khmer Rouge crimes, Lardreau could respond only by severing the link that had held his early political philosophy together – the link between the will of the masses and the course of history.<sup>30</sup>

The revelation of Cambodia's killing fields marked for Lardreau, as for many of his contemporaries, a definitive break with the Marxian pursuit of political power as a means of realizing freedom and overcoming poverty and injustice.<sup>31</sup> Khmer atrocities proved, to Lardreau, that anyone who still seeks to rebel against or at least limit the violence of mastery and oppression must first deny any *actual* autonomy of revolt, any worldly or political possibility of moving 'beyond the history of the Master'.<sup>32</sup> From now on, Lardreau is prepared to accept that, as far as justice and morality are concerned, the only kingdom that matters is indeed 'not of this world'. By the late 1970s, he has convinced himself that 'what we are living today is not simply the repeated failure of revolutions to fulfil their programme of happiness for the people ... but rather the failure of the Idea itself of Revolution.' What has failed, and failed definitively, is the very idea that 'political struggle might be able to transform, in a radical way, people's lives' (LM, 13). What will be at issue from now on, strictly speaking, is not the relative successive or failure of this or that project, but the need for any project to retreat without reservation from the very dimension in which it might either succeed *or* fail; that is, to retreat from its very existence and temporality as a project *tout court*. In *Le Monde*, even those vanishing traces of revolutionary political affirmation that had persisted in *L'Ange* are now purged without trace, so as to count 'strictly for nothing' (LM, 279).

## V

Once he had admitted that 'revolution is impossible', Lardreau was left with two choices. He could have revised his earlier condemnation of society as oppressive, and simply abandoned his revolutionary pretensions: this would have allowed him to follow the majority of his contemporaries, as they undertook their neoliberal turn in the mid- to late 1970s, and made their peace with individualism, representation and the capitalist state. Or else he could uphold his revolutionary ideals, in all their intransigent integrity, while absolving them from the domain of actuality; that is, by reconceiving them as merely negative or regulative ideals – in short, by retreating from Rousseau to Kant. These ideals could then still be affirmed without qualification, and without fear of criminal actualization, so long as they remained a matter of purely moral obligation, or of a spiritual redemption *from* actuality. Confronted with the world's reality and injustice, Lardreau eventually found what he was looking for – an emphatically 'real' point of resistance, a 'granite' point that remains forever 'irreducible and unavoidable' (LM, 40; cf. LV, 149) – in Kant's idea of transcendental or extra-natural freedom, freedom understood as the capacity to posit an unconditionally binding moral law, such that 'freedom and unconditional practical law reciprocally imply each other'.<sup>33</sup>

Although this isn't the place to consider the sequence in detail, we might chart Lardreau's subsequent movement away from the 'actuality of revolt' in three overlapping moments. In *L'Ange* (1976), he still affirms the will to revolt against the evils of the world, while acknowledging that so long as it is invested in an actual emancipatory political project so then revolt may always be deluded, co-opted and harnessed to new forms of oppression. In *Le Monde* (1978), revolt withdraws from any political engagement with the world at all, in order to take refuge in an uncompromising 'moral attitude', one that upholds our duty to respect the imprescriptible rights that should apply to every individual in all situations. In *La Vérité* (1993), the neo-Kantian framework for this moral attitude is reaffirmed but reframed along still more strictly 'negative' lines, in keeping with the purely 'supersensible' and supra-actual quality of our freedom to posit an unconditional moral law. If *Singe* was sustained by an 'act of faith in the thought of the masses in revolt' (SO, 89), when in due course this faith was tested by its contradiction in reality, Lardreau's response was not to abandon his faith but to transfer it away from a faith in political capacity to

a faith in faith as such, faith as a spiritual discipline in search of means to minimize its dependence on the things and development of this world.

What Lardreau calls 'the modern age' (i.e. the age that spans the era between the French and Chinese cultural revolutions) decided that it was in the exercise of great or revolutionary politics that 'the supersensible vocation of culture can and must become sensible'.<sup>34</sup> Participation in the voluntarist projects pursued by such 'Great Politics' was based on the assumption that human fulfilment and emancipation could be achieved in actuality, through collective determination to overcome all resistance to their realization; political action thereby offered a demanding but feasible road, both for Rousseau and for Marx, Lenin and Mao, to an eventual 'reign of freedom'.

As everyone knows, most of Lardreau's contemporaries who shared his youthful enthusiasm for this project simply abandoned any reference to our 'supersensible vocation', along with any illusion that it could somehow transform our all-too-sensible historical reality. What is distinctive about Lardreau's trajectory, by comparison with the various 'roads to renegacy' followed by so many of his former comrades,<sup>35</sup> is that he never abandoned his defence of either the rightness of revolt or of the resolve to pursue it. The maxim of the materialist *parti du réel* that he defends in his last publications remains: '*faire effort*' (VM, 50, 57). The real contemporary alternative to Lardreau's rebellious engagement, from this perspective, is not so much to be found among the rival post-Maoisms of Badiou or Rancière as in the renewal of 'Stoic pacifism', spiritualist immanence and productivist vitalism that he associates primarily – and with good reason – with Deleuze.<sup>36</sup>

However, after the excesses of the Khmer and cultural revolutions had persuaded him that every attempt 'to bend figures of political power to the highest ends of reason' can end only in 'disastrous and criminal failure',<sup>37</sup> the chief critical target of Lardreau's later philosophy becomes precisely that notion of an *actually* general will that he affirmed, via Rousseau and Mao, in his first book.<sup>38</sup> The supersensible must be respected for what it is, as *réel* in a roughly Lacanian sense, rather than realizable.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, Lardreau abandons the terrain of collective action for that of the individual conscience, the work of worldly emancipation for a noumenal freedom, and the concrete exercise of political power for the pure postulation of an abstract law and the formal norms it entails. The task of practical

philosophy ceases to be a matter of overcoming those social and political obstacles that might prevent the full generalization of the people's will, the full self-emancipation of humanity or the full realization of a collective freedom, so as to take refuge instead in the absolute transcendence of the moral law. Against any further temptation to think politics and philosophy together, for the later Lardreau the essential feature of any philosophy worthy of the name will become its ability to negate all such articulation, so as to preserve, in all its unending vertigo, the abyss that ought always to separate our moral duty from our political capacity. In the end,

if philosophy has nothing to say about Great Politics as such, this is simply because the one contradicts and excludes the other, and vice versa. ... In other words: no political decision can be legitimately deduced from any philosophical position, and it would seem that the converse should be retained as a reliable criterion: any orientation of thought which presumes that political decisions might be directly concluded from it is an orientation that is foreign to philosophy.<sup>40</sup>

The main significance of Lardreau, considered as a philosopher of the will, then, is itself a negative one: he demonstrates how the drive to absolve it from actuality evacuates the practice of volition itself, rendering it indistinguishable from mere wish or aspiration, on the one hand, and an effectively involuntary reflex ('one must always revolt against oppression'), on the other. If we cannot frame it in terms of political will as such, then there is no way of defending an account of collective self-determination from those that might seek to reduce it either to pious aspiration or to the force of habit.

If Lardreau deserves to be recognized as one of the few thinkers of his time to have taken seriously 'the will to revolt', it is because he sought to ground it in normative criteria drawn from revolt per se – first the political revolt against worldly injustice, and then the moral revolt against any persistence in political revolt. We would do better, however, to seek our normative criteria in the practice of free collective volition or self-determination itself. The alternative to Lardreau's *via negativa* is not to persist in the 'Lin Biaoist madness' that compromised its point of departure, but to consolidate the conjunction, in every sphere of its exercise, between a political will and the actuality of its *capacities*, including those capacities, constituted precisely through free and voluntary practice, to assemble, to inform, to deliberate, to unite, to engage and to overcome the obstacles that

stand in the way of its engagement.<sup>41</sup> As Lardreau knew full well, at every stage of his philosophical itinerary, to will the end is indeed to will the means.

## Notes

1. A longer version of this article, which considers Guy Lardreau's later work in more detail, is forthcoming in a volume of the *Cahiers de L'Herne* devoted to his philosophy, edited by his widow Esther Lardreau.  
For a short overview, see Peter Hallward, 'Guy Lardreau: Introduction', *Angelaki*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2003, pp. 85–95, and the biography posted on Lardreau's commemorative website, <http://lesingedor.fr>. Cf. Alberto Toscano, 'Mao and Manichaeism: An Episode in the Politics of Purity', *Parallax*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2011, pp. 49–58; Simon During, *Exit Capitalism: Literary Culture, Theory and Post-Secular Modernity*, Routledge, London, 2009, pp. 140–46; Peter Starr, *Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory After May '68*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1995, ch. 5; Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought*, McGill–Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2007, ch. 23.
2. I use the following abbreviations for books by Lardreau: SO: *Le Singe d'or: essai sur le concept d'étape du marxisme*, Mercure de France, Paris, 1973; LA: with Christian Jambet, *L'Ange. Ontologie de la révolution, tome 1: pour une cynégétique du semblant*, Grasset, Paris, 1976; LM: with Jambet, *Le Monde, Réponse à la question: qu'est-ce que les droits de l'homme?* Grasset, Paris, 1978; LV: *La Vérité: essai d'une philosophie négative*, Éditions Verdier, Lagrasse, 1993; ED: *L'Exercice différé de la philosophie: à l'occasion de Deleuze*, Verdier, Lagrasse, 1999; VM: *Vive le matérialisme!* Verdier, Lagrasse, 2001.
3. Guy Lardreau, 'The Problem of Great Politics', trans. Peter Hallward, *Angelaki*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2003, p. 90.
4. *Ibid.*
5. 'Terrorism is essentially *virtuous*, and that is its strength' (Guy Lardreau, 'Un Paradoxe pratique: Conférence prononcée à Lagrasse en août 1997' [unpublished typescript], p. 19); at the end of his published trajectory, Lardreau will conclude that 'virtue and happiness do not form a unity' (VM, 20).
6. Although Lardreau left Gauche Prolétarienne in 1972, a year before *Singe* was published, as Michael Christofferson notes the book was 'recognized by Jean-Pierre Le Dantec and Olivier Rolin to be a synthesis of the GP leadership's thought at the time' (M. Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s*, Berghahn Books, New York: 2004, p. 59 n 151). Cf. Jean-Pierre Le Dantec, *Les Dangers du soleil*, Les Presses d'aujourd'hui, Paris, 1978, p. 168; Antoine Liniers [Olivier Rolin], 'Objections contre une prise d'armes', in François Furet et al., eds, *Terrorisme et démocratie*, Fayard, Paris, 1985, pp. 165–6; During, *Exit Capitalism*, p. 141.
7. ED, 51 n4; cf. VM, 35 and *passim*.
8. The book's title refers to a verse by Mao Zedong, much quoted by the Red Guards during their campaign to sweep away 'the four olds' (i.e. traditional customs, culture, habits and ideas) that they condemned as obstacles to revolutionary progress in 1960s China: 'The Golden Monkey wrathfully swung his massive cudgel / And the jade-like firmament was cleared of dust' (Mao Zedong, 'Reply to Comrade Kuo Mo-jo' [17 November 1961], translated in *Ten More Poems of Mao Tse-tung*, Eastern Horizon Press, Hong Kong, 1967, p. 14; cited in Richard Solomon, *Mao's Revolution and the Chinese Political Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971, p. 418).
9. The initial version of the canonical formulation, from 1939, reads: 'There are innumerable principles of Marxism, but in the final analysis they can be summed up in one sentence: "To rebel is justified" [or: it is right to rebel]. For thousands of years everyone said, "Oppression is justified, exploitation is justified, rebellion is not justified." From the time that Marxism appeared on the scene, this old judgement was turned upside down, and this is a great contribution' (Mao Zedong, 'Speech at a Meeting of All Circles in Yan'an to Commemorate Stalin's Sixtieth Birthday' (21 December 1939), in *Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings 1912–1949*, vol. 7, ed. Stuart Schram, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk NY, 2005, p. 310. Cf. Alain Badiou, 'An Essential Philosophical Thesis: "It Is Right to Rebel against the Reactionaries"' [1975], trans. Alberto Toscano, *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2005, pp. 669–77.
10. Cf. Mao Zedong, 'A Letter to the Red Guards of Tsinghua University Middle School' (1 August 1966), in *Chairman Mao Talks to the People: Talks and Letters 1956–1971*, ed. Stuart Shram, New York: Pantheon, 1974, pp. 260–61.
11. SO, 101. It's worth remembering that Lardreau wrote *Singe* at a time when Foucault, in discussion with members of Gauche Prolétarienne, affirmed the September massacres of 1792 as a worthy example of direct popular justice, and when Sartre, together with many of Althusser's recent students, saw the practice of 'establishing' intellectuals in factories as means of political regeneration, allowing them to 'become new people' (Michel Foucault, 'Sur la justice populaire. Débat avec les maos' [5 February 1972], in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 2, Gallimard, Paris, 1994, pp. 340–41; Jean-Paul Sartre, 'L'Ami du peuple', in *Situations VIII: Autour de 68*, Gallimard, Paris, 1985, p. 464.
12. Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 2006, pp. 111ff.
13. Guy Lardreau, 'La Science est-elle policière?' [conversation with Bernard Henri-Lévy], *Magazine littéraire* 85, February 1974, p. 60.
14. Guy Lardreau, 'Entretien avec Gilles Hertzog', *Magazine littéraire* 112–113, May 1976, p. 55. The same order of priorities explains Lardreau's rejection of psychoanalysis, at this stage of his project, or at least those versions of psychoanalysis that might ground repression and alienation in biological, developmental or symbolic mechanisms that may allow the play of random chance or 'fortune', but that are not themselves open to deliberate transformation. 'The most profound Freudian thesis', Lardreau concludes, 'is that there is no History.' And 'if there is no History, if fortune governs the world, then it is always wrong to revolt. I maintain that Freudianism is today the principal obstacle that the thinking of history, of revolt, will encounter along its route' (SO, 227).
15. Jacques Rancière makes no mention of Lardreau in *La Leçon d'Althusser* (1974), and he figures only once, as the object of a parenthetical dismissal, in Rancière's 1970s' articles in *Les Révoltes Logiques* (cf. J. Rancière, 'La Légende des philosophes: Les intellectuels et la traversée du gauchisme' [1978], in *Les Scènes du peuple*, Horlieu, Lyons, 2003, p. 290). But for all their obvious differences with Rancière, Lardreau and Jambet share his post 1973 aversion to *militantisme* as a form of top-down authority associated with the prestige of science (Lardreau, 'Entretien avec Gilles Hertzog', pp. 56–7).
16. Karl Marx, 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction' [January 1844], *Collected Works of Marx and Engels*, vol. III, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1975, p. 187.
17. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976, p. 929.
18. As Badiou also puts it, a few years later, 'Maoism is not merely a defense of revolt, it is the Marxism of our time' (Alain Badiou, 'L'État du front', in *La Situation actuelle sur le front philosophique*, Maspero, Paris, 1977, p. 9).
19. Guy Lardreau, 'Le Sens d'un retour à Rousseau', *Le Quotidien de Paris*, 29 and 30 June 1974, p. 11.
20. SO, 142; cf. Lardreau, 'Le Sens d'un retour à Rousseau', p. 11.
21. For more on this aspect of Rousseau's work, see Peter

- Hallward, *Rousseau and Political Will*, Verso, forthcoming.
22. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 4, Gallimard, La Pléiade, Paris, 1959–95, pp. 308–9; cf. Rousseau, *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 1059; ‘Lettre à Malesherbes’, 4 January 1762, *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 1132.
  23. Rousseau, *Émile*, p. 576.
  24. Antonio Gramsci, ‘Workers’ Democracy’ [1919], in *Pre-Prison Writings*, ed. Richard Bellamy, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 99; cf. Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism* [1920], Verso, London, 2007, p. 25; L. Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours: The Marxist View of Morality* [1938], Resistance Books, Broadway NSW, 2000, p. 28. The aims of any political organization, as Gramsci puts it, remain ‘empty, bombastic whim, until it possesses the means to act – until whim has been converted into will’ (A. Gramsci, ‘Our Marx’ [1918], in *Pre-Prison Writings*, p. 57). The same idea illuminates Che Guevara’s attempt to identify the essence of guerrilla warfare as a means of revolutionary struggle: ‘Each guerrilla fighter is ready to die not just to defend an ideal but to make that ideal a reality. This is the basis, the essence of guerrilla struggle. The miracle is that a small nucleus of men, the armed vanguard of the great popular movement that supports them, can proceed to realize that ideal, to establish a new society, to break the old patterns of the past, to achieve, ultimately, the social justice for which they fight’ (Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare: Authorized Edition*, Ocean Press, Melbourne, 2006, p. 20).
  25. Cf. SO, 127; LA, 125; Guy Lardreau, *Dialogues avec Georges Duby* [1980], Les Dialogues des petits Platons, Paris, 2013, pp. 76–7; Guy Lardreau, ‘Ne pas céder sur la pensée’, *Le débat*, September 1980, p. 40.
  26. SO, 52. If one objects to the apparent persistence of reactionary ideas among the masses, Lardreau argues, the blame should be assigned where it belongs. ‘We say: if, among the masses, there is fascism, or religion, or even what Lenin called “leftism”, this is because their desires find no other means of satisfaction’ (SO, 123).
  27. Lardreau, ‘Entretien avec Gilles Hertzog’, p. 56. With respect to this point at least, the older Lardreau might have accepted some of Badiou’s subsequent characterization of Gauche Proletarienne as consumed by ‘an impatient megalomania with regard to the course of history, a conviction that the Maoists were in a position to take power or at least to overturn the situation very rapidly’ (Alain Badiou, ‘Roads to Renegacy: Interview by Eric Hazan’, *New Left Review* 53, September–October 2008, p. 129).
  28. Against Bernard Henri-Lévy’s reading of mass revolt as a once-in-a-century exception, in 1974 Lardreau still insists that ‘the masses are always in a state of rebellion, and always clash with established power’ (Lardreau, ‘La Science est-elle policière?’, p. 59).
  29. Cf. Jacques Rancière, *Althusser’s Lesson*, trans. Emiliano Battista, Continuum, London, 2011, pp. 119–20. At a time when what remained of Maoist enthusiasm was rapidly fading in France, Badiou was likewise critical of his ‘leftist’ rivals’ naive belief in ‘the dazzling coincidence of their new-found morality and the historical aspirations of the people’ (Badiou, ‘L’État du front’, p. 10; cf. Bruno Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2011, pp. 144–50). In his barbed dismissal of Lardreau’s new and avowedly ‘angelic’ interpretation of revolution, Badiou regrets that ‘what had appeared as the rock of an indelible popular insurrection’ should thus ‘evaporate in an aleatory interrogation’, to become a mere ‘visitation’, a matter of grace (A. Badiou, ‘Un Ange est passé (G. Lardreau et C. Jambet)’ [1977], in *La Situation actuelle*, p. 67).  
Consideration of Badiou’s critique of Lardreau would be incomplete, however, if we didn’t draw attention to two ways in which, in the mid-1970s, Lardreau anticipated at least part of Badiou’s own later trajectory. First, Badiou’s critique of Lardreau’s ‘angelic turn’ is based on a still more emphatic version of the onto-historical affirmation that sustains *Singe* – that is, an affirmation of the contemporary reality of an ongoing and imminently victorious popular revolt. No less than Lardreau in 1973, Badiou in 1977 maintains an unflinching confidence in the ‘heroic wisdom of the masses’ (A. Badiou, ‘Le Flux et le parti (dans les marges de l’Anti-Oedipe)’, in *La Situation actuelle*, p. 38), and continues to ‘maintain, and to prove, that history is the history of victories, and that there is no example of class that is antagonistic to the existing order which, at the moment when it sets itself up as a political class, does not eventually prevail, and remodel the world in its own image’ (‘Un Ange est passé’, pp. 69, 77). Badiou, in other words, was less quick than Lardreau to abandon an insistence that ‘the only proven revolutionary path, the only one that is practicable and intelligible here and now, [is] that of Maoism and the dictatorship of the proletariat’ (‘L’État du front’, p. 14).  
Second, then, when calls for such dictatorship lose their efficacy as a political directive in the later 1970s, Badiou confronts a similar challenge to the one Lardreau faced some years before him – how best to preserve a logic of popular revolt once it can no longer be directly articulated with the ‘real movement’ of irresistible historical change? In some respects, the answer to this question that Badiou develops over the course of the 1980s invites comparison with the trail first blazed by Lardreau, as he moves away from the historically determinant force of proletarian antagonism and the ongoing victory of cultural revolution to a theory centred on the universalizable consequences of wholly haphazard and evanescent events – whose status he has often been willing to associate with the logic of ‘grace’. Cf. Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2003, pp. 115, 122.
  30. See in particular LM, 13, 191–2; Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet, ‘A proposito della Cambogia’, *Spirali*, January 1979 [references are to the French typescript], pp. 1–2. Cf. Toscano, ‘Mao and Manichaeism’, p. 51.
  31. ‘It is the same desire for freedom that animates us, as always. However, and this was the tragedy of a whole era, this desire was invested for a time in a machine that crushed human beings, i.e. in Marxism. We participated in this history, and perhaps we will be the last generation to do so – we must hope so’ (Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet, ‘Une dernière fois, contre “la nouvelle philosophie”’, *La Nef* 66, January–April 1978, p. 40).
  32. *Ibid.*, pp. 36–7; cf. LA, 153.
  33. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, AK 5:29; ‘A free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same’ (Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, AK 4:447), in Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996; references are to the standard pagination of the German *Akademie* edition.
  34. Lardreau, ‘The Problem of Great Politics’, p. 90.
  35. Cf. Badiou, ‘Roads to Renegacy’, pp. 125–33.
  36. ED, 51; cf. Peter Hallward, *Out of This World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation*, Verso, London, 2006, pp. 162–4.
  37. Lardreau, ‘The Problem of Great Politics’, p. 90.
  38. Guy Lardreau, ‘Une théorie totalitaire’, *Le Monde*, 7 April 1978; cf. LM, 89–92; Guy Lardreau, ‘L’Universel et la différence’, *La Nef*, NS 4, 1981, pp. 82–3.
  39. See, for instance, LM, 40; LV, 211; ED, 80–81; VM, 27.
  40. Lardreau, ‘The Problem of Great Politics’, pp. 93–4; cf. Guy Lardreau, ‘Habent sua fata’, *Filozofski Vestnik*, vol. 16, no. 2: *Ethique et politique*, 1995, p. 6.
  41. For an account of this alternative, see Peter Hallward, *The Will of the People*, Verso, London, forthcoming.