



To Lose Oneself in the Absolute **Revolutionary Subjectivity in Sorel and Fanon**

George Ciccariello-Maher

University of California at Berkeley

gjcm@berkeley.edu

Abstract: In this article, I analyze the theories of revolutionary subjectivity that emerge in Sorel's seminal *Reflections on Violence* and in the discussion of Négritude in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and national consciousness in *Wretched of the Earth*. Both thinkers formulate revolutionary violence in terms of the *absoluteness* of identity, but an absoluteness which is necessarily transitional: for Sorel, absolute working-class identity is a mechanism which operates on a world-historical scale and transforms everything that it touches, whereas for Fanon—in his critique of Sartre—the limitations of Négritude cannot be skillfully inscribed within a broader and determinist dialectic. Finally, I discuss the degree to which Fanon's formulation exceeds that of Sorel, resolving a tension which becomes exceptionally acute in the work of the latter: the tension between a non-objective theory of class and an insistent class-centrism. As a result, Fanon's intervention helps us to realize what is most useful in Sorel's framework.

While we have no reason to think that Martinican-born revolutionary Frantz Fanon based his theory of violence in any direct way on the work of French syndicalist Georges Sorel, it is highly unlikely that Fanon was totally unfamiliar with this philosopher whose name had come to be so coterminous with violence. However, most of those who discuss the relation between these thinkers—whether for the sake of drawing them together or pushing them apart, whether to endorse or dismiss them—consistently fall into erroneous reductivist and formalistic interpretations of what both Sorel and Fanon mean by “violence.” When

interpreted correctly, once we remove the customary prejudices attached to the names “Sorel” and “Fanon”—by clarifying that for both, violence represents the content of a mythical form of revolutionary identity—we can find in these two thinkers strikingly similar theories of revolutionary violence and subjectivity.

SARTRE'S DISAVOWAL

The textual relationship between Sorel and Fanon is peculiar, to say the least, not least because it is mediated by Jean-Paul Sartre's dismissal, in his preface to Fanon's

George Ciccariello-Maher is a Ph.D. candidate in political theory at the University of California, Berkeley. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Monthly Review*, *Radical Philosophy Review*, *Journal of Black Studies*, *Qui Parle*, *Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture*, and *The Commoner*. He currently lives in Caracas, Venezuela, from where he contributes regularly to *Counterpunch*.

Wretched of the Earth, of “Sorel’s fascist utterances” (Sartre 1963: 14). Here, Sartre disavows Sorel on behalf of Fanon, but it is worth asking why Fanon had not done so himself, and what is tacitly affirmed by Sartre’s disavowal. As to the first, it is clear that the imperative to distance oneself from the Sorelian legacy certainly weighed more heavily in France than in the revolutionary periphery. But despite the fact that Sartre is the first to tell us that Fanon’s work does not speak to Europeans—“they will go on talking among themselves, without even lowering their voices”—Sartre nevertheless chooses to contradict this position by submitting Fanon’s work to the intellectual pieties of the French milieu (1963: 13).

More interesting still is what it is precisely that Sartre says in the passage in question: “if you set aside Sorel’s fascist utterances, you will find that Fanon is the first since Engels to bring the processes of history into the clear light of day” (1963: 14). Sartre’s dismissal of Sorel takes the paradoxical form of an affirmation, since he tacitly admits that Sorel falls within that exceptionally perceptive group of thinkers who recognized the role of violence in history.¹ That Engels informed Fanon’s understanding of violence is clear, claims to the contrary notwithstanding: Reda Malek is known to have given him a copy of Engels’ *The Role of Force in History*, and Fanon cites the *Anti-Dühring* on several occasions (Gendzier 1973: 203).² But what of Sorel? Sartre’s dismissal attempts to erase this crucial question before it is even asked.

¹ This is perhaps not paradoxical at all, given some discussions on the structure of disavowal as tacit recognition; see Sybille Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*.

² Despite recognizing that Fanon read and cited Engels, Gendzier’s understanding of “influence” seems to be limited to positive influence. Indeed, Fanon cites Engels mostly to refute his simplistic claims about the technological determinants of violence and to doubt his politics, but this does not undermine Engels’ influence more broadly, or the possibility that Fanon was building on Engels’ prior efforts. [Did Sartre cite Engels in the *CDR*?]

This gesture has been repeated, albeit with notably less venom, by a number of subsequent commentators, mostly partisans of Fanon. But in so doing, a number of errors have been committed. These can be broadly grouped under two headings: reductive and formalistic interpretations of the work of both Sorel and Fanon (often leading to the same outcome regardless of whose work is being distorted), and relatedly, the exaggerated fidelity to any number of categories (class, the proletariat, syndicalism) constituting the perceived contexts of the thinkers. As we will see in what follows, it is only by combating the former that the latter is resolved.

In what follows, I will delineate the often overlooked parameters for properly grasping violence in Sorel’s formulation, before turning to Fanon in an effort to determine whether Sartre’s fascinating disavowal indeed reveals more than it conceals. In both, we will see that the key to a non-reductive understanding of their theories of violence lies in a recognition of the continuity of the theme throughout their work. Once properly understood, their respective theories provide the key to grasping a more fundamental link between the two thinkers: the structure of their respective theories of revolutionary subjectivity, of the formation of radical consciousness.

SOREL ON VIOLENCE

The fundamental interpretive error of those who understand Sorel’s violence wholly according to its formal characteristics—i.e., what we commonly understand by the word “violence”—is to have neglected Sorel’s own self-proclaimed purpose. In closing his seminal if infamous *Reflections on Violence*, Sorel expresses his satisfaction at having “accomplished the task which I imposed upon myself; I have, in fact, established that proletarian violence has an entirely different significance from that attributed to it by superficial scholars”

(1961: 248-249). Such “superficiality” unfortunately extends to most discussions of Sorel in the present.

What does it mean to assert that such violence is not to be confused with what is generally understood by the word? It is above all to assert what is for Sorel an essential distinction: that between bourgeois “force” and proletarian “violence.” Sorel’s long and markedly varied career is notable for its continuity in a small number of themes, one of which is his hostility to what he deems “Jacobinism,” a phenomenon which clearly derives its name from the French Revolution but whose existence Sorel—as early as his 1889 *Trial of Socrates*—projects backward into even ancient times (1987: 62; 67). This Jacobin tendency, defined by its “superstitious cult of the state,” is the basis of bourgeois force (1961: 109).

Proletarian violence, on the other hand, is an entirely different beast: it consists of “acts of revolt,” since “the object of force is to impose a certain social order in which the minority governs, while violence tends to the destruction of that order” (Sorel 1961: 171). Violence, for Sorel, is necessarily anti-statist, and this is because it is inherently opposed to the repressive machinery of minority governance. This, again, was visible in even Sorel’s early work, as in opposition to Athenian “Jacobins,” Sorel demonstrates a palpable scorn for the new class divisions that Socratic philosophy facilitated, and the minority rule of the “philosopher-king” (1987: 65-67). For Sorel, violence is expressly marked by its *content*, by its revolutionary anti-state and anti-bourgeois orientation. This is by definition a violence of the oppressed.

Such violence is, moreover, dismissed as “irrational” by most, and it is through this claim that we can see that these formalistic interpretations really constitute *inversions* of Sorel’s thought. This is because it is in Sorel’s notion of “myth”—rather than “violence”—that we find the formal element in Sorel’s analysis. This mythical mechanism

had been recognized early on by Sorel, long before his contact with French vitalist Henri Bergson. As early as his *Trial of Socrates* (1889), Sorel was concerned with Socrates’ efforts to formulate a science of war: to do so is to contradict the very spirit of warfare itself, and thereby to short-circuit the source of Athenian virtue. Rather, the power of myth bears a striking resemblance to warfare: it is by shunning all pragmatic calculation and identifying absolutely with the struggle at hand that a truly powerful revolutionary subjectivity is crafted. Hence Homeric epics are to be celebrated over a dry Socratic rationalism (1987: 63; 69-70).

For Sorel, the myth is but one form—and a particularly potent one—that proletarian violence can take. There can be myths without violence (as was the case with the French Revolution), and there can be violence without myth, in which case “one may go on talking of revolts indefinitely, without ever provoking any revolutionary movement.”³ Revolution requires the unity of the form and the content: “*violence enlightened by the idea of the general strike*” (249). When divorced from its violent, liberatory content, the myth can be turned to positively reactionary ends: the French Revolution turned such myths toward a Jacobin Terror. The Law of the 22nd Prairial was, for Sorel, merely an extension of a royal justice whose “*essential aim was not justice, but the welfare of the State*” (1961: 107-109).

When united with proletarian violence, on the other hand, the myth becomes essentially a mechanism for the consolidation of revolutionary identity. In Sorel’s context, this takes the form of a working-class separatism embodied in and established through the proletarian general strike—the unity of liberatory violence with the absolutism of mythical identity—in which a strike against the bosses is transformed into a “Napoleonic” battle and “the practice of strikes engenders the notion of a catastrophic

³ For the former, see Sorel 1961: pp. 49, 249. For the latter see pp. 42, 49, 51, 101, 103, 125.

revolution" (1961: 78). Its mythical character is clear in the fact that syndicalists "restrict the whole of Socialism to the general strike... they see in each strike a reduced facsimile, an essay, a preparation for the great final upheaval" (120). The general strike is

the *myth* in which Socialism is wholly comprised, *i.e.* a body of images capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by Socialism against modern society...the general strike groups them all in a co-ordinated picture, and, by bringing them together, gives to each one of them its maximum of intensity (127).

The general strike's mythical form is a firmness of faith, an absoluteness of identity: "we obtain it as a whole, perceived instantaneously" (128).

FANON ON VIOLENCE

As was the case with Sorel, most commentators reduce Fanon's theory of violence to literally violent manifestations, which is perhaps more understandable in the case of Fanon since he deploys no clear distinction between violence and force, and since he links his discussion of "violence" more directly with physical attacks and terrorism than had Sorel.⁴ But this interpretation can only result from placing an undue emphasis on the chapter "Concerning Violence" in *Wretched of the Earth*. While this indeed constitutes the most sustained discussion of the

⁴ See especially Macey (2000: 465). Gendzier (1973: 200) seems to clearly grasp the distinction in question and the importance of the Hegelian dialectic in Fanon's later theory of decolonial violence. Arendt (1969: 13, 71) argues that unlike Fanon, Sorel wasn't speaking of "violence" as we understand it, and that this was partly because "Fanon... had an infinitely greater intimacy with the practice of violence."

role of violence in the constitution of revolutionary subjectivity, a proper understanding of this dynamic must set out from a much earlier work: *Black Skin, White Masks*. It is here that the revolutionary Black subject discovers her own racialization, and it is here that Fanon develops a theory of violence as ontological self-assertion, one which will then provide the content for a theory of revolutionary subjectivity that is in many ways as "mythical" in form as Sorel's.

This self-confrontation emerges in the fifth chapter—"The Lived Experience of the Black"—which according to Fanon "portrays the Negro face to face with his race... driven to discover the meaning of black identity," torn between either renouncing an identity which has become incomprehensible to her or "heroically" accepting the absoluteness of that identity, hurling herself into that "black abyss" (1967: 13-14). On a Paris train, a racial epithet provokes a singular if common crisis in Fanon's being. Suddenly, he is "an object in the midst of other objects," thereby rendering intersubjectivity, or being either through or for others, impossible (109). Fanon finds himself "sealed into a crushing objecthood," and is suddenly struck by the insufficiencies of the Hegelian dialectic, since "every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society" (109). This experience had revealed the weight of a "historico-racial schema" which effectively prevents black being from having any "ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man" (110-111).

It is on the basis and as a result of this experience that Fanon later turns more directly to the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. For Hegel, according to Fanon, full humanity can only emerge through the attempt to impose one's existence (as "subjective certainty") onto another (thereby converting it into "objective fact") (217-218). In this "quest of absoluteness," the resistance of the other yields *desire*, "the first milestone on the road that leads to the dignity of the spirit" (217-218). Desire, moreover, requires that I

risk my life in conflict for the object of that desire, thereby pushing me beyond bare life and toward independent self-consciousness. Historically, however, the black slave has been granted his freedom by the former slaveholder, who “decided to promote the machine-animal-men to the supreme rank of *men*” (220). “The black man was acted upon,” since it was not by his actions or his desire that this freedom was attained, and as a result access to full humanity—which can only appear by way of mutual and conflictual recognition—was blocked (220). His *way of life* changed, not his *life*, because according to Hegel, recognition gained without conflict can only be recognition as bare life rather than as a free and complete human.

“‘Say thank you to the nice man,’ the mother tells her little boy...but we know that often the little boy is dying to scream some other, more resounding expression” (220). Since there has been no reciprocity in the process, since blacks are denied access to ontology, they have not, according to Fanon, been able to follow the Hegelian path of turning away from the master and finding liberation in the object. Instead, lack of reciprocity leads the slave to turn toward the master and abandon the object (220-221). This, at least, is the case in France, but Fanon finds some grounds for optimism: “in the United States the Negro battles and is battled,” and in some parts of Africa, colonized blacks have “sought to maintain their alterity. Alterity of rupture, of conflict, of battle” (221-222). We can already grasp the broad strokes of Fanon’s theory of violence: self-consciousness *as human* requires symbolic violence, it requires the assertion of reciprocity within a historical situation marked by the denial of such reciprocity, and if necessary, the provocation of conflict through the assertion of alterity.

It is this lack of ontological resistance which provokes an outburst by Fanon, one which bears within it the structure of Fanon’s theory of violence:

Where shall I find shelter from now on? I felt an easily identifiable flood mounting out of the countless facets of my being. I was about to be angry... “Kiss the handsome Negro’s ass, madame!” Shame flooded her face. At last I was set free from my rumination. At the same time I accomplished two things: I identified my enemies and I made a scene. A grand slam. Now one would be able to laugh. The field of battle having been marked out, I entered the lists (114).

Why should the identification of the enemy cause such a seismic ontological shift? Because to discover an enemy, and to discover it clearly, was also to discover something essential about oneself: “I had incisors to test. I was sure they were strong” (115).

Since ontology was denied through what has been deemed the “coloniality of being” (Maldonado-Torres)—kept in the hands by a small minority of ontological “Jacobins”—since there was no basis for the smooth operation of the Hegelian dialectic, such a basis had to be violently created. This ontological self-assertion provides the *content* for Fanon’s revolutionary dialectic, but what *form* does this assertion take? As we will see, this violent self-assert assumes a form strikingly similar to Sorel’s myth, since self-assertion is an assertion of identity:

I was denied the slightest recognition... I resolved, since it was impossible for me to get away from an *inborn complex*, to assert myself as a BLACK MAN. Since the other hesitated to recognize me, there remained only one solution: to make myself known (115).

For Fanon, to assert his black identity was to clear the ground for his ontological equality, and thereby for the proper operation of the master-slave dialectic, one in

which the slave was capable of turning away from the master. Violence here means the violent-self assertion of an identity which could be deemed “mythical” in its absoluteness.

Here he found his solution, however tentative and ambiguous. But it was soon to be “snatched” away by an alleged “friend of the colored peoples”—Jean-Paul Sartre—who would reduce negritude, as a subjective and existential phenomenon, to the status of a “minor term of a dialectical progression...insufficient by itself” (*Orphée Noir*; in Fanon 1967: 133). Fanon’s reply is stinging:

For once that born Hegelian had forgotten that consciousness has to lose itself in the night of the absolute, the only condition to attain to consciousness of self. In opposition to rationalism, he summoned up the negative side, but he forgot that this negativity draws its worth from an almost substantive absoluteness. A consciousness committed to experience is ignorant, has to be ignorant, of the essences and the determinations of its being (133-134).

Sartre’s dismissal of negritude had forced Fanon to clarify the mythical structure of violent ontological self-assertion. By reminding Sartre of his Hegelianism, Fanon is reminding him that the master-slave dialectic cannot operate on a rationalized basis, here sounding a great deal like the Sorel who attacks Socrates.⁵ Yes, negritude may very well be transitory, but to declare so beforehand is to short-circuit this very process. Sartre intellectualizes black experience, and blocks the source of its radical transformation, thereby undermining his own existentialist pretensions: by reinscribing black

⁵ Even when Sartre maintained his Hegelianism—according to Fanon—he followed the latter into error, presuming as well unlimited access to ontology (138).

rebellion within the dialectic, he robs it of all agency, he places the “torch with which to burn down the world” beyond the reach of black hands (134).

Negritude—and the “violent” assertion of black identity—could not exist as mere “historical becoming”:

Jean-Paul Sartre, in this work, has destroyed black zeal. In opposition to historical becoming, there had always been the unforeseeable. I needed to lose myself completely in negritude. One day, perhaps, in the depths of that unhappy romanticism... In any case I *needed* not to know. This struggle...had to take on an aspect of completeness... The dialectic that brings necessity into the foundation of my freedom drives me out of myself. It shatters my unreflected position. Still in terms of consciousness, black consciousness is immanent in its own eyes. I am not a potentiality of something, I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place inside of me. My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It *is*. (135)

“Black zeal” is a mythical identification which by necessity refuses all explanation, all attempts at analytical dissection: it is at once “unforeseeable” and “unreflected,” “immanent” and “complete.” After all, how precisely does one adopt an identity which is dismissed ahead of time as transitory? Sartre becomes a condescending adult speaking to a child: “You’ll change, my boy; I was like that too when I was young...you’ll see, it will all pass” (135).⁶ Despite this attack on his being, or rather this attack on his only hope for being, Fanon nevertheless

⁶ This critique was eventually taken on fully by Sartre, as evident in his self-critique in the “Preface” (Ciccariello-Maher 2006).

pushes forward: “I defined myself as an absolute intensity of beginning... My cry grew more violent: I am a Negro, I am a Negro, I am a Negro” (1967: 138). And it is here that symbolic-ontological violence—in “mythical” and anti-rational form—becomes apparently compatible with violent acts: it is here that Bigger Thomas appears, and it is here that the neurotic inability to inflict violence on whites is seen as equivalent to ontological nonexistence itself (139).

In *Black Skin*, we can already see something very much like Sorel’s revolutionary Marxist dialectic: a violence which is necessarily of, by, and for those oppressed by minority rule (political-economic or racial-ontological), which is deployed “mythically” through an assertion of the absoluteness of identity. Sartre, by failing to recognize the mythical and irrational character that such identity must take, was unable to successfully turn the Marxian dialectic toward a proper understanding of revolutionary subjectivity. Moreover, for Fanon as for Sorel there exist two violences, and while Fanon doesn’t distinguish these terminologically, there can be no comparison between the violence of the slaveholder, the “force” of the master, and the violence of that non-being who seeks only the access to ontological reciprocity: here, the “force” of the master is something worse than even the minority rule so loathed by Sorel, it is *minority access to ontology*, to being itself. As a result, Fanonian violence is, as was proletarian violence for Sorel, an attack on those coagulated structures of privilege which operate to enforce a perpetual hierarchy dividing the human race.

However, the most crucial similarities between the Sorelian and the Fanonian schemas—as well as some of the most fundamental divergences and developments—only emerge through a discussion of *Wretched of the Earth*, as it is there that Fanon’s Hegelian dialectic is opened outward into a second dialectic of revolutionary anti-colonial war. If we had any doubt

that the “violence” discussed in the opening chapter of *Wretched of the Earth* was theoretically equivalent to the ontological self-assertion of *Black Skin*, our doubt cannot last long. After all, it was in the earlier work that Fanon would observe that, “without a Negro past, without a Negro future, it was impossible for me to live my Negrohood. Not yet white, no longer wholly black, I was damned” (1967: 138). That non-being—prior to a violent and mythical self-assertion—is precisely the *damné*, the “wretched” as it is rendered in English, that would coalesce as a revolutionary subject in Fanon’s last work. “Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men,” Fanon will tell us, and this is an ontological gesture: “the ‘thing’ which has been colonized becomes a man during the same process by which it frees itself” (1963: 36).

Fanon’s analysis in *Wretched*, however, threatens to undo our argument in two ways: firstly, by encouraging a formal understanding of violence, and secondly and as a result of the first it undermines the difference between liberatory violence and oppressive force. After all, are we not told that violence is equivalent to “searing bullets and bloodstained knives,” to a “murderous and decisive struggle” (37)? And does not this *realpolitik* understanding of violence reflect the fact that the violence of the native is “furnished by the settler,” linked to the latter by “an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity” (84; 87)? It should be clear, nevertheless, that the analysis offered in *Black Skin* remains intact here: the colonial world, Fanon tells us, is “compartmentalized” divided and sustained by “lines of force” (38). Faced with the Manichean architectural *force* of colonial geography—a division which epitomizes the “Jacobinism” of oppressive minority governance that Fanon had already documented in ontological terms—only *violence* will suffice (38). The attempt to destroy the apartheid inherent to the colonial system is in no way equivalent to those efforts which established and main-

tained it, since it is precisely the tight relation between settler and native that reveals their incommensurability: "For the native, life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler. This then is the correspondence, term by term, between the two trains of reasoning" (93).

But perhaps the best proof that Fanon's violence is irreducible to violent acts lies in the fact that the violence of ontological self-assertion *precedes* the violent act, since "it is precisely at the moment that he realizes his humanity that [the colonized] begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure its victory" (43). Violence is rebellious consciousness, dignity in revolt (as the Mexican Zapatistas describe it). The native's *claim to equality* is in fact *proof of that equality*, and this is but one step prior to the struggle (44). This intention to struggle creates the ground for Hegelian reciprocity:

Thus the native discovers that his life, his breath, his beating heart are the same as those of the settler. He finds out that the settler's skin is not of any more value than a native's skin; and it must be said that this discovery shakes the world in a very necessary manner (45).

This "shaking" of ontological categories allows the native to turn away from the master-settler, and to turn toward the object, in the terms laid out in *Black Skin*. But in this context, the object in question is the knife or the gun, and the liberation provided by labor has taken on a new significance: "The militant is also the man who works," but now, "to work means to work for the death of the settler" (85). The immobility of the Negro in Sartre's *Respectful Prostitute* has been definitively superseded, and in taking up the "violence" of the settler, the native has already surpassed it and transformed it beyond all but the most formal recognition.

Moreover, it is in this very surpassing of the settler's force, in the demarcation of the

revolutionary violence of the native, that the *content* of that violence emerges in a specific *form*, and one which closely parallels the formulation of Sorel. Simply put, the practice of a violence which has been appropriated from the settler—an appropriation which sets the stage for ontological reciprocity—operates *mythically*, as it "introduces... the ideas of a common cause, of a national destiny, and of a collective history" (93). Much like Sorel's myth of the general strike, Fanon describes the natives aspiration "to wreck the colonial world" as "a mental picture of action which is very clear, very easy to understand" (40-41). This is "not a rational confrontation of points of view... but the untidy affirmation of an original idea propounded as an absolute" (41). Those very myths which had been the supreme proof of native backwardness were now to be turned toward liberatory ends. These "old warrior-like traditions" are what sustains the anti-colonial struggle, and hence Fanon's hostility to those Europeanized native intellectuals who rejected them in favor of an abstract universal (116). The first murmurings of spontaneous peasant rebellion take the form of "a confraternity, a church, and a mystical body of belief at one and the same time" (132-133). These formulations closely resemble Sorel's celebration of the Homeric epic: from 1952 traditional Algerian storytellers returned once again to the epic form, and it was no coincidence that colonial forces would repress this movement as early as 1955 (241).

Hence, while Renate Zahar avoids an overly reductive view of violence by observing that Sorel and Fanon share an emphasis on the violence of the poor, she falls into error in the claim that, unlike Sorel, Fanon "is averse to any myth and analyses conditions scientifically" (1974: 86, see also Macey 2000: 465, Gendzier, 1973: 204). Just as Sorel considered his work to be "scientific" in terms of understanding the role of mythical violence in driving human history, so too does the same understanding of science apply to

Fanon: both formulate a necessarily liberatory violence which takes on and operates through what could be deemed “mythical” mechanisms, providing the revolutionary content of the latter. Zahar, moreover, claims that this difference—which does not exist—is rooted in divergent understandings of violence. This too is erroneous, and it is perhaps unsurprising that the author marshals little direct evidence to support this claim, aside from a quotation from Marcuse which is openly dismissive of Sorel (86-87).

THE DIALECTIC OF SUBJECTIVITY

It is on the basis of this unity of violence with the myth—a unity which, once understood correctly, can be seen in both Sorel and Fanon—that we can trace the broad strokes of the operation of radical subjectivity in both thinkers. In so doing, we will be able to pinpoint and assess crucial divergences between the two thinkers. For both, the nexus of liberatory violence with the mythical projection of identity contributes to a virtuous circle: somewhat paradoxically, it is only through the violent self-assertion of an antagonistic subjectivity that the revolutionary subject can be created and consolidated.

For Sorel, the consolidation of revolutionary subjectivity requires above all decisive action, in which “oppositions, instead of being glossed over, must be thrown into sharp relief... the groups which are struggling one against the other must be shown as separate and as compact as possible (1961: 122). This is where the proletarian general strike—the unity (in Sorel’s context) of liberatory violence with mythical identity—in which, “all parts of the economic-juridical structure, in so far as the latter is looked upon from the point of view of the class war, reach the summit of their perfection; society is plainly divided into two camps, and only into two, on a field of battle” (132).

It is only through such a division internal to society that Marxist science regains its

objectivity. Liberal radicals and parliamentary socialists would preach social harmony, seeking to “educate” the worker into accepting the current division of labor, and if they are successful, then only social decadence and barbarism could ensue, “and the future of the world becomes completely indeterminate” (90). Against such a threat, the mythical violence of the proletarian general strike operates on society, and the workers are advised

to repay with *black ingratitude* the *benevolence* of those who would protect the workers, to meet with insults the homilies of the defenders of human fraternity, and to reply by blows to the advances of the propagators of social peace... [this] is a very practical way of indicating to the middle class that they must mind their own business and only that. I believe also that it may be useful to thrash the orators of democracy and the representatives of the Government... But these acts can have historical value only if they are the *clear and brutal expression of the class war* (91).

Only then might the middle classes “get back a part of their energy” and return to their role within the dialectic which drives history: “proletarian violence confines employers to their role as producers, and tends to restore the separation of the classes, just when they seemed on the point of intermingling in the democratic marsh” (92). Class separation restricts capitalism to its “material role” and restores to employers their “warlike qualities,” thereby in turn reinforcing the same in the working class and “mak[ing] the future revolution certain” (92).

Sorel’s understanding of revolutionary subjectivity, then, is one in which liberatory revolt—that is, the *content*—is “thrust on the [mythical] road of the absolute” (259). This

separatist dialectic of myth and violence is both efficacious and ethical: the absoluteness of revolutionary identity embodied in the myth is deployed through violent opposition to the oppressor—in this case, the bourgeoisie—thereby feeding the reinforcement of the identities involved, and eventually the total renovation of the social basis for those identities. It is this function of violence that Sartre tacitly endorses in his “Preface,” and which in many ways prefigures that of Fanon.⁷

Like Sorel, Fanon too sees the operation of mythical violence in terms of the dialectical consolidation of a revolutionary subjectivity. In *Black Skin*, we have seen how this violence takes the form of an ontological self assertion which ruptures racial overdetermination, thereby clearing the way for the operation of the master-slave dialectic. Black non-being is converted through violent self assertion into a being which, however subordinate, was not denied access to subjectivity *a priori*. But this self-assertion needed to take the form of an identification with negritude, identification with a concept and an identity which, however imperfect and empirically dubious, provided the necessary mythical mechanism through which the dialectic of subjectivity could operate. It was only through an accentuation of difference—through a separatist moment—that black consciousness could force this dialectic: “to make myself known” meant “to assert myself as a BLACK MAN” (1967: 115).

This separatist dialectic is repeated in *Wretched*, but now the white-black dyad overlaps with that of settler-native, and while Fanon maintains the significance of the racial element of colonialism, negritude is definitively replaced by national con-

⁷ Sartre’s critique of negritude might suggest that his position toward Sorel and the myth might be more critical. However, we must bear in mind that by the time he penned the “Preface,” he had already moved much closer to Fanon’s position regarding the dialectic of subjectivity (Ciccariello-Maher 2006).

sciousness. Here, the two phases of the anti-colonial struggle overlap consistently with the two phases of radical consciousness visible in *Black Skin*: the separatist moment in both is necessarily superseded by a subsequent universalizing moment. In this first phase, hatred is directed toward the colonizer in concentrated form, and the scene is ripe for conflict: “The atmosphere becomes dramatic, and everyone wishes to show that he is ready for anything. And it is in these circumstances that guns go off by themselves” (1963: 71). It matters little who fires first, since the effect is the same: the dialectic of separation begins to turn.

Both the “absolute evil of the native” and the “absolute evil of the settler” become more acute (93), the native’s rebellion is met with repression and positions harden on either side. Specific acts of violence are required as a “royal pardon” which prevents the native from returning to the colonial system (86). “The armed struggle mobilizes the people; that is to say, it throws them in one way and in one direction” (93), and formerly uncommitted intellectuals find themselves in a “backward surge” which draws them “toward bases grounded in the people” (46). In this first stage the efficaciousness of mythical identity is clear, since “the most elementary, most savage, and the most undifferentiated nationalism is the most fervent and efficient means of defending national culture” (244). The consolidation of identity which marks the separatist stage of the dialectic of revolutionary subjectivity is the direct result of the unification of liberatory violence with a mythically-projected identity, and it is in this dialectic that ultimately draws Sorel and Fanon together in many aspects.

It is worth mentioning that the shift in Fanon’s mechanism of radical identity—from negritude in *Black Skin* to national consciousness in *Wretched*—leads many readers to distinguish too firmly between the two works. The two reflect a common understanding of the operation of radical subject-

tivity, and their divergence is largely historical: in 1952, negritude remained a historical necessity (as Fanon makes clear to Sartre), whereas by 1961 it had largely become a reactionary tool in the hands of neo-colonial puppets in Africa. This, moreover, is largely a result of the fact that negritude had by this point traveled from the first (separatist) moment toward the second (universal) moment of the dialectic: those “*wishing to skip the national period*” were guilty of precisely the same error Sartre had committed in *Orphée noir*; that of an abstract universalism which short-circuits identity (247).

Finally, the assertion of theoretical congruency between Sorel and Fanon is not merely an end in itself, but is moreover a point of departure for grasping the fundamental divergences that exist between the two thinkers, or better put, the degree to which Fanon surpassed Sorel’s formulation. While much can be said on this subject, due to space restrictions I will make some brief suggestions regarding the notion of class. Sorel set out from the recognition that there existed no objective basis for class, but also from the desperate need to construct the *idea of class*, thereby inverting the traditional Marxist schema by placing the class-for-itself prior to the class-in-itself (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 39-41). Fanon goes a step further, broadening Sorel’s inversion by recognizing that, at least in the colony, it is not merely class-in-itself and class-for-itself, but base and superstructure as a whole which are inverted. In so doing, Fanon pushes decisively beyond Sorel’s class-centrism: why, Fanon asks, should we continue to privilege class if it has no objective basis? If Sorel’s answer is political efficacy, then Fanon responds on the same terms: to speak of political efficacy in the colonies is to reject the traditional working class, and moreover to reject class identity as central in the first place. He exploits a clear weakness in Sorel’s account to force a decolonial turn. This entire relation is missed by those like Gendzier (1973: 204), who exaggerate the *specific* di-

vergences between the thinkers at the expense of the *general* similarities.

It is only on the basis of these very real theoretical convergences between Sorel and Fanon—specifically, that of the dialectic of revolutionary subjectivity—that we can then credibly chart their divergences without giving in to the temptation of reductivist errors.

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