Just Revolutionary Violence:

On the Possibility of Novelty in Political Life

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Contents

Abstract

This thesis addresses two interrelated issues. The first is how we come to think and enact the possibility of overturning the political order in which we find ourselves. This is of particular issue when we consider that our situations always over-determine our possibilities for thinking and acting. The second issue involves the question of how revolutionary violence can be said to be *just*, or in other words how the act of violence can avoid reinscribing a state of affairs only superficially different from the violent one it sought to overturn. I address these issues using the works of Frantz Fanon and Alain Badiou, two figures in the existential-phenomenological tradition. Fanon's phenomenological account of oppression gives us a concrete context for thinking the conditions of revolutionary action as presented by Badiou's ontology. I argue that Badiou's ontology can account for the lived experience of political oppression as well as the possibility revolutionary violence, despite its "Platonic" idealism.

Introduction:

Political Justice as Revolutionary Violence? Thinking Through Plato

> Are you so wise that it has slipped your mind that the homeland is deserving of more honour and reverence and worship than your mother and father and all of your other ancestors? And is held in higher esteem both by the gods and by men of good sense? And that when she is angry you should show her more respect and compliance and obedience than your father, and either convince her or do what she commands, and suffer without complaining if she orders you to suffer something? And that whether it is to be beaten or imprisoned, or to be wounded or killed if she leads you into war, you must do it? And that justice is like this, and that you must not be daunted or withdraw or abandon your position, but at war and in the courts and everywhere you must do what the city and the homeland orders, or convince her by appealing to what is naturally just? And that it is not holy to use force against one's mother or father, and it is so much worse to do so against one's homeland?
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> Socrates in Plato's *Crito*[1]

What does it mean to participate *truly* and *justly* in political life? If we take Socrates' argument in the *Crito* as a guide for considering this question, participating in the communal life of one's homeland in a way that is in accordance with justice requires that either we accept the rule of our community or we persuade our community, *without the use of force*, to recognize and accept the "natural justice" of an alternative way of being. Socrates additionally disqualifies the use of force from being eligible for the status of just action in the *Republic* when he suggests that a thing or act is characterized by injustice insofar as its character is *incongruous* with its own character and the character of the things around it. As he claims,

> injustice has the power, first, to make whatever it arises in—whether it is a city, a family, an army or anything else—incapable of achieving anything as a unit, because of the civil

[1] Plato, trans. Cathal Woods and Ryan Pack. *Crito.* 52b.

> wars and differences it creates, and, second, it makes that unit an enemy to itself and to what is in every way its opposite, namely, justice.[2]

What seems to follow from this claim is that any novel addition to the political state of affairs may be considered just only insofar as it is *harmonious* with the state of affairs already established by the community. Socrates gives further clarification to the kind of congruity required for justice when he suggests that justice is, essentially, the harmoniousness of one thing with another according to reason.[3]

This rendering of the notion of justice operating in Plato's writings reveals two hidden presuppositions that come to underlie the understanding of justice that the Western philosophical tradition inherits from Platonism. First, if harmoniousness with the pre-established state of affairs means harmoniousness with that state of affairs from the perspective of reason, it follows that the state of affairs has already been established according to reason, such that additions that are in harmony with that state of affairs are also reasonable. Second, since violence against the state of affairs entails acting in a way that is disharmonious with that state of affairs, such action must be inherently unjust, and therefore unreasonable. In addition, Socrates further condemns the use of violence as unjust by limiting its effects to being merely and exclusively destructive in character. As he says in the *Republic*, "those who are all bad and completely unjust are completely incapable of accomplishing anything," since those who incite conflict with the established order

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[2] Plato, trans. John M. Cooper. *Republic,* 352a.
[3] *Ibid.,* Book 2.

merely destroy what has already been positively accomplished, with the help of reason, by other rational beings.[4]

Evidence that this understanding of justice, and particularly the justice of violence, has been inherited and re-appropriated by modern thought can be seen in the Western world's broad yet hypocritical condemnation of the use of violent force. Although what is called "the West" exerts imperial, colonial, and exclusionary violence on non-Western nations and peoples, it simultaneously thinks the *counter*-violence by non-Western others to be irrational and ultimately unjust acts of pure, material destruction. I maintain throughout this thesis such a view ignores the possibility that acts that are violent to the prevailing state of affairs can in fact be *productive* of progressively meaningful, rational, and just circumstances for our political co-existence.

Importantly for maintaining this position, what Socrates failed to acknowledge in his exclusion of violence from just political life is the possibility that the *polis* cannot be persuaded to favor what is truly reasonable *without* the use of force, such that acting in disharmony with the state of affairs is the only way to achieve any sort of political novelty, particularly the kind of novelty that institutes a progressively just or reasonable state of affairs. Since justice and injustice, according to their Platonist renderings, are Ideas towards which particular, situated beings can only fail to fully reflect, they are absolute and mutually exclusive aspects of being. This causes the discussions of them that we find throughout Plato's works to lack specific provisions for generating situations that are "more" or "less" just, instead focusing on the form that just or unjust states of affairs can take. In the *Republic*, a political situation is either in

[4] *Ibid.,* 352c.

harmony with reason, such as when it is governed by the consistently impartial philosopher-king, or it is disharmonious with reason, such as in the city ruled by the tyrant who governs according to his own interests.[5] Though the regimes between these two opposite poles—timocracy, oligarchy, and democracy—are "just" and "unjust" to different degrees, because Socrates focuses on the forms of these regimes themselves, he provides no guidance as to how to bring a tyranny to justice.

As such, the question that Socrates leaves unanswered is that of how the individual could ever "reason" with the tyrant and his authoritarian order, *without the use of force,* to bring about a state of affairs that is progressively just. As Socrates rightly points out, the unjust regime ignores the equality of all of its members—an equality he bases in the universal capacity of all human beings to access the faculty of reason—in favor of instituting a hierarchy based in the interests of some individuals over and against those of others. In this way, the paradigm for reasonableness has shifted into unreasonableness and partiality, in that what *seems* to be reasonable, from the point of view of the order set out by such a regime, is the continued fulfillment of the interests that have come to take priority, making its persuasion without force an impossibility.

However, a similar problem haunts the case of the regime ruled by the supposedly rational and impartial philosopher-king. The philosopher-king, like the tyrant, is only human, and as such is not capable of an impartiality that wholly reflects the perfection of the Ideas; even the most rational among us cannot help but be partial to our own interests and perspectives over

[5] *Ibid.,* Books VII and VIII.

those of others. In our one-sidedness, we can never imagine all possibilities, and we tend to focus on achieving the actuality of the possibilities towards which they are already inclined. And depending on the severity with which certain states of affairs deny the possibility of alternative ways of being, it can be immensely difficult, from a perspective conditioned by the limits of a particular state of affairs, to begin to think that other ways might be possible, or even preferable, for the development of our co-existence. No matter who rules, our political reality never fully reflects the Idea of Justice, and this seems to leave an opening for rethinking political violence as consistent with Platonism.

In contrast to the Platonic tradition's seeming condemnation of political violence, thinkers in the existential tradition that follow the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre affirm the possibility that violent action against the political status quo might in fact be *required* to achieve a progressively just state of affairs. However, this means acknowledging that the hypothetical scenario of a "perfectly just" political situation is nothing more than an intellectualist fantasy, for otherwise the violent act could be destructive of a state of affairs which is in fact already "perfectly just." This acknowledgement, for the existentialists, comes in the form of their assertion that we are the kinds of beings that have the character of being *free*—within limits—to cultivate both the specifics of our own characters and those of the situations we inhabit. And since we cultivate ourselves according to our partial and one-sided perspectives, the situations we cultivate for ourselves inevitably "come to be" in ways that are as partial and one-sided as we are.

Interestingly, however, Plato's understanding of violence as that which is disharmonious with its context is in line with the Sartrean tradition's broad understanding of the violent act. According to Sartre and others, the violent act leverages aspects of the world to alter the way that world is ordered. In so doing, it institutes a new form for the world, and its violence lies in the fact that this new form is necessarily disharmonious with the form of its past. By this account, we shape our own history by altering the terms of our world's operation, violating the hegemony of past constitutions for that order in favor of novel states of affairs. In their observation of history, Sartre and others conclude that it is often only by way of the use of material force that individuals can be "persuaded" to acknowledge the injustice of social and political worlds that are set up in partial and one-sided ways, especially when the constitutions of those worlds privilege the interests of some individuals in a particularly heavy-handed way.

Importantly, this understanding of the violent act is predicated on the claim that all human beings, *qua* human, are equal in their capacity for violent "transcendence"—or in other words, in their capacity to leverage their objective circumstances in order to fundamentally alter those very circumstances—and that the more a situation accommodates this capacity, the more harmonious those circumstances become with the characters of the human beings that shape them. This, it seems to me, is precisely the influence of Plato on the Western tradition's thought about justice that has survived to the present day.

However, as we will see throughout the following thesis, not all thinkers following the existential tradition agree on the necessity of the act that genuinely violates the pre-established state of affairs in a revolutionary or progressive way. The two figures that will exemplify these

divergences in the tradition are the revolutionary anti-colonialist philosopher Frantz Fanon and the contemporary French ontological philosopher Alain Badiou. In writing from and about the colonial context, Fanon reveals that the contradiction inherent to colonialism lies in its misrecognition of free individuals as if they were mere objects, making the violent overturning of its imposition of "objecthood" a necessary consequence of its initial institution.[6] In contrast, Badiou presents a framework for thinking about the structure of human life *in general.* In so doing, I argue, he explains why thinking and enacting revolution towards novel possibilities is such an embattled and difficult reality in a way that does not limit his analysis to any particular set of oppressive circumstances. This framework reveals that from the perspective of the individual situated within them, all prevailing orders for the being of our worlds appear to be *absolutely inclusive* of all possible ways of being, such that the possibility of additional or alternative realities is "unforeseeable" and therefore unthinkable according to the terms of the situation to which we are immediately limited. Action that fundamentally overturns the operating principle of the situation, then, is an entirely *unnecessary*—though real—phenomenon, one that cannot flow automatically from the very operation of any particular situation—not even the colonial one.

However, to compare two figures as diverse as Fanon and Badiou on the possibility of revolutionary action is no arbitrary choice, as they have much common ground between them. Although they enact different methodologies—one phenomenological, the other ontological—they both take heed of the same figures in the existential and phenomenological traditions. Jean-

[6] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Press, 1967)*,* 114.

Paul Sartre is the immediate influence in both cases, but they also take lessons about the conditions of political reality from Hegel and Marx, while Badiou takes subtle influence from Martin Heidegger's phenomenology regarding the role of truth in human life. It is from the thought of these figures that they both begin to think the process by which any state of affairs can come to *appear*, from within experience, as having been determined *arbitrarily*, or in other words as having been determined by foreign agents in a way that is not perfectly harmonious with one's own ideals. And though they understand this arbitrariness in different ways, they see its revelation to the individual to be the condition of possibility for the individual to violently force her situation to "come to be" in a way that comes closer to reflecting our ideal-yet-real *equality* in terms of our capacity for transcendence. As we will see in the thought of both of these figures, the ideal of equality can be assumed without also assuming the separable existence of discrete beings. On the contrary, the development of circumstances conducive to our transcendence is a thoroughly *collective* affair.

The main insights we stand to gain from the comparison of these two figures are as follows. First, in order for revolutionary violence to avoid violating the appeal to equality from which it derives its sense of justice, it must not impose a specific "*telos"* or ultimate "end" upon the violent act, since, as we will see, to do so is to import the partial and one-sided interests of the one who imposes, invalidating the action's claim to strive towards cultivating a situation that genuinely reflects each individual's essential equality with all others. Both Fanon and Badiou are agreed on this point, though the direction that revolutionary violence takes for each of them, as we will see, causes their notions of the violent act to have a slightly different character. Second,

and contrary to Fanon's claim that "ontology does not allow us to understand the being of the black man, since it ignores the lived experience," Badiou's ontological framework arguably bridges the apparent gap in Fanon's thought as to how the situated individual comes to think that the state of affairs *can* and in fact *should* be otherwise.[7] This bridging relies on Badiou's theorizing of the ontology of the "evental supplement" as the condition of possibility of beginning to *think*, and later to *hope for*, the "reality" of pure equality that is never more than ideally "real". When these two conceptions of genuine revolutionary violence are taken together, they allow us a more complete picture of the reality of revolutionary action that aims towards the novelty of a state of affairs that is "more just" than those which came before.

The first chapter of the following thesis takes Fanon's analysis of the experience that is conditioned by colonialism as a concrete context for thinking the reality of political life. I explain why Fanon thinks revolutionary violence to be, first, necessarily *material* in nature, and second, to be a necessary consequence of the very institution of specifically colonial conditions for the individual's being in the world. The second chapter explores how Badiou's ontological framework both holds to Fanon's assertion of humanist equality—based in our capacity for transcendence—and pushes the notion of transcendence forward, thinking it to be an entirely unnecessary consequence of its state of affairs, since that state of affairs, by its very ontological character as coercive, always already limits the possibility of thinking and being otherwise than it has prescribed.

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[7] Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, 90.

One will notice that each section of one chapter is broadly related to the corresponding section of the other. The first section of each reveals the influence of the traditions of phenomenology and existentialism on their thought, particularly with regards to how they understand what it means to be politically situated. I take a broad understanding of political life here, as Marx demonstrated that our political being in the world is not reducible to our coercion by the bourgeoisie, since it also includes all of the ways a particular social context determines how a society comes to value and recognize certain things over others. The second section explains how the methodologies of Fanon and Badiou determine their understandings of the conditions of political situatedness that make possible the kind of revolutionary activity one can actually observe in our personal and collective histories. These conditions include the ways in which our being *as* politically situated is the condition of our struggle with both our historical past and our unforeseeable future. The third and final section reveals how each figure guards their account of revolutionary violence against contamination by the kind of partial and one-sided interests that would thwart its striving towards the institution of political situations that better reflect our essential equality. As I hope to show with this analysis of these two figures, violence—if it is genuinely *revolutionary* in the ways these figures describe—is not merely the destruction of the past, but is in fact *productive* of novel conditions for our political being in the world, upending the teleological association, inherited from the Platonic tradition, between justice and harmony.

Chapter One

The Reality of Revolution: Fanon on the Necessity and Justice of Political Violence

I do not carry innocence to the point of believing that appeals to reason or respect for human dignity can alter reality. For the Negro who works on a plantation, there is only one solution: to fight. He will embark on this struggle, and he will pursue it, not as the result of a Marxist or idealistic analysis but quite simply because he cannot conceive of life otherwise than in the form of a battle against exploitation, misery, and hunger.

Frantz Fanon[8]

Introduction

One of the most controversial issues in scholarship on the thought of Frantz Fanon regards the character of the violence he advocates that colonized peoples enact against their domination by colonial occupiers. Some scholars opt to shy away from a literal reading of his use of the term "violence," instead focusing on the sentiment that the colonial regime must be *negotiated with* in a way that irremediably changes its character as colonial. However, Fanon could not be less equivocal in his demand for a specifically *material* violence, such as when he writes that "for the native, life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler."[9] I maintain that if we are to read and interpret Fanon faithfully, we must understand the meaning of this demand.

This chapter defends Fanon's demand for material violence through three main sections, all of which contribute to an argument for the *necessity* and the *justice* of a

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[8] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* 224.

[9] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Présence Africaine, 1963), 93.

specific kind of violence Fanon advocates throughout his works. The first section discusses the influence of the traditions of phenomenology and existentialism on Fanon's thought. In particular, I highlight how he relies on this inheritance, which looks at the human being as a free being always already situated in a context that simultaneously provides the condition of her freedom and the condition of her coercion. We will find that because the colonized, *qua* human being, has a particular existential character, she can come to experience colonial rule as arbitrary in a way that allows her to contest violently the legitimacy of that rule. I then analyze why Fanon thinks that this contest is a necessary consequence of what I will call the ironic character of the colonial regime, as well as why the response to this irony needs to be materially violent in character—not least since the situation colonized is faces is *already* violent. The final section attempts to mark a distinction in Fanon's thought between *just* and *unjust* revolutionary violence—or, in more precise terms, between *genuine* and *ingenuine* revolutionary action. Importantly, Fanon's rendering of genuine violence differs from what is commonly associated with the term, broadening our understanding of violence in a way that reveals the breadth of its significance for the political life of the being whose existential character is by the freedom to actively—and sometimes violently—negotiate given the terms of her world. My central claim is that insofar as Fanon pushes the existential and phenomenological understanding of violence forward by thinking the target of violence to be *the injustice of the regime itself*, it need not—and, throughout his writings, *does not*—shy away from the necessity, nor from the legitimacy, of material violence.

Fanon's Phenomenological-Existential Analysis

Scholars often miss the broad applicability of Fanon's analyses for thinking about political subjectivity because they fail to recognize the degree that Fanon uses phenomenological and existential methods.[10] Fanon's first book, *Black Skin, White Masks,* includes a phenomenological analysis of the situation of colonialism that describes the contradictions and tensions embedded within the phenomena by experienced by the colonized individual. However, because he borrows techniques developed by thinkers in the phenomenological and existential traditions, particularly Hegel and Jean-Paul Sartre, his analyses also have broad significance for what it means to be politically situated in general. Fanon compares vastly different experiences of political life to reveal the underlying structures required for political life in general. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), this means contrasting his own experiences in the Antilles islands—the colonial world—with his experiences living in France, the world of the colonizer. What this comparison reveals is that within the experience of colonization itself, there is a lived sense in which imposition by the colonizer on one's individual way of being is arbitrary, and that this arbitrariness is felt more strongly than it is by French citizens living under French rule. In Fanon's words, though "the governing race is first and foremost those who come from elsewhere, those who are unlike the original

[10] Lewis R. Gordon, "Fanon's Tragic Revolutionary Violence" from *Fanon: A Critical Reader* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1996), 298.

inhabitants," it nonetheless orders the world of the original inhabitants as if it were that world's original architects.[11]

However, this "lived sense" of the arbitrariness of the rule of the colonizers can be hidden from the view of the colonized by the "host of colonial complexes" that the colonial environment produces in them, complexes that for Fanon conceal and thereby defer the necessity of revolt against the regime's instrumentalization of the colonized.[12] Here, Fanon builds on Hegel's analysis of one of the ways in which the human being can fail to coerce another to recognize her as *the* absolute and essential being. According to Hegel's explanation of the master-slave relationship in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, an individual who is aware of her own thinking and acting in the world "exists only in being acknowledged," self-consciously, by another self-conscious individual.[13] Since objects in the world cannot *self-consciously* acknowledge *any* existence, to be acknowledged by an object is meaningless and therefore ultimately unsatisfying. However, a paradox arises when one attempts to acknowledge the self-conscious existence of other individuals, since such an acknowledgment would contradict one's own claim to being *the* self-conscious being. In a doomed attempt to solve this paradox, one individual coerces another into recognizing oneself as absolute by transforming the situation such that the other individual functions as if she were an unselfconscious *object* that responds to one's demands absolutely. While this is doomed to failure precisely because the self-conscious

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[11] Fanon, *The Wretched of the* Earth, 40.
[12] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* 30.
[13] G.W.F Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford University Press: 1977), 112.

other now appears as an object unable to fulfill the demand for self-conscious recognition, it can for a time appear to both the coerced and the coercing individual to be satisfying.

Fanon demonstrates how this doomed dynamic is enforced on a massive scale by showing the ways in which the colonizer attempts to transform the colonized individual into an objectified cog in the operation of colonial society. As we saw revealed in Hegel's analysis, the Western colonizer will not even approach the kind of self-conscious recognition he desires if he relies only on material or physical domination, since it is the individual's self-conscious being that must affirm the colonizer as absolute. This causes the colonizer to turn to the *psychical oppression* of the native population. As Fanon writes of this strategy:

> The colonialist bourgeoisie, in its narcissistic dialogue…had in fact deeply implanted in the minds of the colonized intellectual that the essential qualities remain in spite of all the blunders men may make: the essential qualities of the West, of course.[14]

Such "essential qualities" include forcing colonized individuals to accept the norms that reinforce white hegemony while also enforcing the West's instrumentalization of the labour of the colonized. Here, although the goal of achieving the absolute recognition of the colonized may *seem* to the colonizer to be achieved when the he imposes his perspective on the minds of the colonized, revolution against this psychical coercion will

[14] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* 46.

be the outcome of the artificial imposition of objecthood on the actually self-conscious native.

The conditions determining the differing degrees to which the arbitrariness of this coercion is felt is described in more detail in his later *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Here, Fanon demonstrates that the colonial regime is not only ill-suited to accommodate the character of the individuals that it relies upon for its operation, but it itself *violates* the requirements for the flourishing of that character. This incompatibility between the character of colonial society and the character of the colonized individuals living within it explains the experience of arbitrariness revealed in *Black Skin, White Masks*: the individual experiences herself as a subject who can choose and take up her own ends and projects. These ends and projects have meaning and purpose by virtue of having been chosen by her, but they are also experienced as having been determined in an arbitrary way when they have been chosen not by the individual in accordance with her free transcendence, but instead by an external agent. When the colonized eventually assert their freedom over and against its subordination to the external will of the regime, the regime's "mass slaughter" of the colonized confirms that the political order is an arbitrary and foreign imposition on the freedom of the individual to genuinely choose her own ends and projects.[15]

However, because the institutions of any social and political context impose ends and projects that structure the individual's social and political possibilities, those ends

[15] *Ibid.*, 71.

and projects can for a time be experienced by individuals to be genuinely meaningful to their own lives, necessary to living with and amongst others, or absolutely determined before any individuals enter the scene—even in the grossly unsuitable colonial context. In Sartre's words, "only the project, as a mediation between two moments of objectivity, can account for human history, that is, for human *creativity*."[16] But the impression that pre-made ends and projects are not imposed from without can cause the colonized individual to choose or "take up" those ends and projects *as if they were genuinely her own*. This can be seen when the individual takes up the colonizer's understanding of the black man as the opposite of the white man, which is merely *relational* in that it posits the white man as essential and the black man as derivative, as if it has its foundation in the very *being* of the white and black bodies. In his words:

> Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.[17]

Fanon here argues that despite this merely contingent and relational character, the distinction between blackness and whiteness comes to be "taken up" as if it were essential to the very being of the world, independent of its being "taken up" by human beings.[18] For example, in the colonial situation, blackness can be taken up by the individual as a meaningful project, as when the colonized individual "owns" her

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[16] *Ibid.,* 99.
[17] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* 109.
[18] *Ibid.,* Chapter 5, "The Lived Experience of the Black Man".

"blackness" by acting according to the colonial order's understanding of what it means to be black. It can seem necessary to maintaining social order, as when the colonizer uses it to limit the freedom of the black man, or it can appear to be an unassailable fact of the world, as it appears to those who justify colonialism on the basis of appeals to some biological difference among the races. But as Fanon demonstrates, blackness cannot appear as if it were an ontological reality unless the individual "takes it up" as if it were *already* a reality; her action, in turn, *produces* it into an objective reality that is understood as having ontological significance.[19] In short, though blackness does not correspond to any non-contingent reality, it comes to be experienced as if it were grounded in the very being of the black body when it is consistently taken up in the world by individual action.

This reveals something about the existential character of the beings that can make the aspects of social life that are in fact unnecessary and contingent appear as if they were absolutely meaningful. The phenomena of social and political life that have been reaffirmed by individual action over time may appear to the situated individual to be absolute, they are nonetheless contingent in that they can be sedimented otherwise. This is what Sartre means when he says that when it comes to the human individual, "one can never understand the slightest of his gestures without going beyond the pure present and explaining it by the future": insofar as we exist as human beings, we project ourselves–in

[19] *Ibid.,* 110.

the present—towards ends which lie ahead of us in space and time.[20] So although blackness can appear as an undeniable reality, the fact that we can eventually see it *as mere appearance* reveals that we are the kinds of beings who can *transcend* or *go beyond* what merely appears as absolutely real so as to make other phenomena appear, phenomena which is more suited to our self-conscious experience of the world.

Fanon's explanation of how the "fact of blackness" comes to be taken up by individuals in a way that can contribute to their own oppression confirms Sartre's characterization of the experience of finding oneself situated within human history. As Sartre writes, it is by "transcending the given" and reaching towards alternative possibilities that "the individual objectifies himself and contributes to making History," sedimenting her specific intentions and involvements out in the world.[21] But our relationship to the reality that appears outside of us is fundamentally ambiguous, in that we can relate to what we inherit either by acknowledging its contingency and reordering its constitution *or* by affirming it as absolute and ordering our behaviour according to its already-established constitution. Sartre points to this ambiguity when he writes that man

> is *at once both* the product of his own product and a historical agent who can under no circumstances be taken as a product. This contradiction is not fixed; it must be grasped in the very movement of *praxis*.[22]

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[20] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method* (Vintage Books: 1969), 152.
[21] *Ibid.*, 93.
[22] *Ibid.*, 87.

In other words, we are structured by the way things are, but we also contribute to the way things are, and it is this reciprocity that allows us to overcome the seeming paradox of being both product and producer. If we accept that we are capable of conditioning objectivity by constantly transcending that which we inherit, we always experience the possibility, distant though it may be, that we could come to feel absolutely "at home" in our objective context.

The problem is that since the objective world is also the context *against which* we act in our effort to make that feeling of being "at home" a reality, and since our projects and intentions always change on the basis of what has already been established as objective, the objective world is not experienced as perfectly comfortable or satisfactory. This is exemplified in Heidegger's phenomenological description of the moments in which we come face-to-face with the fact that we are not totally "at home" in the world, experiencing anxiety over the "thrownness" of our being-in-the-world without being able to pinpoint a particular cause within the world for that anxiety.[23] By Sartre's account, we experience our objective context in such moments as if it were an entirely "alien force" standing in the way of one's projective ends, instead of the very context in which our projective ends are enacted and reflected back to us.[24] Even as we experience differing degrees of anxiety and comfort at the sight of our world, we never see our internal

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[23] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Blackwell Publishing: 19621. To use Heidegger's words, this anxiety "does not signify that the world is absent, but tells us that entities within-the-world are of so little importance in themselves," and in experiencing this insignificance, the world feels like an alien imposition, rather than a comfortable home that wholly reflects our action (231).

[24] Sartre, *Search for a Method,* 89.

thoughts and intentions *wholly* reflected in the world outside of us, as "each day with our own hands we make it something other than what we believe we are making it, and History, backfiring, makes us other than we believe ourselves to be or to become."[25] This understanding of the embattled relationship between objectivity and freedom is picked up by Fanon when he writes that the "disalienation" of the masses from their oppressive political reality will "come into being through their refusal to accept the present as definitive"—or in other words, in their "taking up" their freedom against the perpetual alienation of that supposed "home."[26]

The intensity of our anxiety and comfort, or alienation and disalienation, is a matter of degree, since the world we have created can be differently suited to our particular projective ends at different times. But the difference *in kind* between the subject's *self*-objectification in the history to which she contributes and the objectification of the subject *herself* by an exceedingly alien history is essential for thinking a distinction between just and unjust political action. The inability of the colonial system to accommodate the existential character of the people it governs means that colonization is inherently contradictory: the regime relies on those individuals and their existential character as free to "take up" the construction and maintenance of colonialism's ends and projects out in the material world, yet in the same moment

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[25] *Ibid.*

[26] Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks,* 226.

disavows that freedom by positing those individuals as mere objects. This contradiction is precisely the unjust principle that effects the material injustice of the regime.

Further, in the colonial case, this contradiction is a *gross* contradiction: not only does the regime fail to accommodate the character of her existence as free—which it could in fact accomplish by providing a suitable environment for the individual to determine her own ends and projects—but it actually *violates* that character by treating the individual as if she were a mere instrument for fulfilling the ends and projects of the colonial system. The ontologically bankrupt distinction between blackness and whiteness is both at the root of the regime's existential injustice and cultivates a context that is suitable for the reproduction of its own injustice by the very actors upon whom the injustice is imposed. In short, the regime posits this distinction as if it were an undeniable part of all human situations in order to justify its misappropriation of free subjects as inert objects for its own instrumental use.

Insofar as Fanon's phenomenological-existential analysis reveals the roots of the injustice of colonialism, I argue that it also *ipso facto* justifies violence that aims to eradicate the arms enforcing the "crushing objecthood" that Fanon describes.[27] This may at first seem paradoxical: how can violence be the solution, rather than the exacerbation, of a state of affairs characterized by violence? We can solve this paradox by rethinking the commonsense association between "violence" and "disharmony." My claim here is that we may be right to relate the two terms, but we are wrong if we equate them. As we

[27] *Ibid.,* 114.

have seen, colonialism produces a political situation that does violence to the existential character of the individuals it in fact relies upon for its existence. Those who live under colonialism have been thrown into a situation that is disharmonious with their existential character. The institution of such a situation is colonialism's initial moment of violence against the colonized. But if the individual responds to this violence by attempting to strike down the violent state with a violence of her own, her violence against this state of affairs is in a certain sense harmonious with that state of affair's initial violence. Fanon affirms my equation here between violence and harmony, or "balance," when he writes:

> The violence of the colonial regime and the counter-violence of the native balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity…The development of violence among the colonized people will be proportionate to the violence exercised by the threatened colonial regime.[28]

In other words, whereas allowing the violence of the state remain would be to let the disharmony of the situation remain, violence against a violent state of affairs is precisely the inauguration of a harmonious relationship between the character of the state affairs and that of the individual. And if violence can in certain circumstances be harmonious with the situation at hand, it follows that violence is not *a priori* equivalent to disharmony.

However, the "harmony" of revolutionary violence with colonial violence is a non-issue if we are not the kinds of beings capable of becoming *conscious of* and *acting*

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[28] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 88.

upon the necessity of violence against the state of affairs that does its own violence to free subjects by treating them as inert objects. The next section will use Fanon's analysis to show that the required conditions for genuinely revolutionary consciousness and action are fulfilled in human life.

The Conditions of Revolution

The Truth of Colonialism

The sense of the arbitrariness that we found to accompany one's experience of foreign impositions on one's aims and projects can be explained by two of the central tenets of existentialism, both of which are picked up in Fanon's thought: first, that the cultural order is never reducible to the natural order, and second, that as long as the individual lives, her freedom can never be rendered null and void.[29] We see the influence of both of these tenets in Fanon's example of the colonized individual who, when faced with the arbitrariness of a regime that heavily suppresses the individual's freedom to engage with the world, is nonetheless free to oppose her oppression by maintaining the image of destroying the regime in her imagination.[30] Freedom for Fanon is thus not something that is granted by the White Master, but is rather an inexorable characteristic of the individual that the White Master can only try and fail to suppress.

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[29] Sartre, *Search for a Method*, 152.

[30] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* 41. Fanon also uses the example of the natives who begin to use the local language, as in this way "the imagination is let loose outside the bounds of the colonial order," affirming that individual human freedom is undeniable—even if that freedom can only enacted be in the mind (68).

Early in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon claims that the moment of colonization begins the process towards the eventual destruction of the products of the colonial regime, and thus the destruction of colonization itself.[31] Fanon first provides support for this claim that revolution against colonialism is inevitable when he argues that the "meaning" of colonization—which, as we have said, is its unjust coercion of subject into object—is always already present and waiting for the colonized to *take it up* in the form of a violent stand against it. He writes:

> And so it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already here, pre-existing, waiting for me. It is not out of my bad nigger's misery, my bad nigger's teeth, my bad nigger's hunger that I will shape a torch with which to burn down the world, but it is the torch that was already there, waiting for that turn of history.[32]

Fanon thus argues that the possibility of the individual's becoming conscious of the unjust "meaning" of the colonial world, and later the revolutionary intent to "burn down" that meaning, do not spring merely from the *material lack* that colonization forces the colonized to endure.[33] Instead, consciousness of the injustice of a particular political order springs from the individual's experience of that order's contributions to the objective world in which the individual lives. In other words, consciousness of the

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[31] *Ibid.*, 36.
[32] *Ibid.,* 134.
[33] *Ibid.*

injustice of a state is an *additional product* of the state's production of an unjust objective context.[34]

This runs contrary to our inherited notion—inherited from the influence of an inaccurately economic picture of Marxism on the history of political ideas—that revolutionary consciousness results from the development of a sense within the masses that it has not been provided with its "fair share," *economically speaking*, by the bourgeoisie.[35] By this line of thought, consciousness of the oppression characterizing the political circumstances of the colonized would be tantamount to consciousness of the *economic disparity* between the material conditions of the majority and those of the privileged minority. In contrast, for Fanon, revolutionary consciousness is the result of one's recognition that the state of affairs *itself* is unjust. This means that material scarcity—though itself unjust—is not at the root of either the regime's injustice nor of the individual's consciousness of that injustice. In the case whose injustice is enforced by a distinction between blackness and whiteness, "the cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, and you are white because you are rich."[36]

This is a controversial reading of Fanon, as many scholars have interpreted him to be a straightforward Marxist who argues that material deprivation is enough to both

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[34] The product of nothing and nothing is nothing—or in other words, some initial objectivity is required for the production of any additional objectivity.

[35] It should be noted that Marx himself would not affirm such a strictly economical understanding of political oppression. This can be seen in the "Alienated Labour" essay, where he shows that the worker's alienation from both her labour and its product is the first moment in the development of the worker's political consciousness. For this essay, see the "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts" section of *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Hackett, 1994).

[36] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 40.

justify and incite revolutionary violence. Such interpretations are right to emphasize the materiality *of the violence itself*—violence is an act, and like all acts, it requires some material to do violence *with* and *against*. But thinking material scarcity to be *the* motivating factor of the revolutionary moment is to reduce the goal of Fanon's revolutionary violence to the Marxist goal of taking back the means of production from the capitalists—and this, if taken alone, could fall into the trap of merely replacing one hierarchical system with another.[37] Instead, genuinely revolutionary consciousness for Fanon involves transcending the material and psychical oppressions of one's own context to recognize that *all* hierarchical systems that limit the freedom of some to the benefit of others is inherently contradictory and therefore unjust.

Though my conclusion here affords little significance to the role of material lack in the *initial development* of revolutionary consciousness by Fanon's account, it does not deny that material conditions play a role in the movement of that consciousness towards revolutionary action. On the contrary, the influence of Marx's writings on Fanon's thought cannot be denied when he writes that "in the colonial countries the peasants alone are revolutionary, for they have nothing to lose and everything to gain,"[38] though of course, like many anti-colonial thinkers of the time, he extends Marx's analyses of the industrial proletariat to those living under colonial rule. When a regime treats subjects as

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[37] For another such interpretation of Fanon's relationship to Marxism, see Ann Murphy, "Violence and the Denigration of the Community: Between Transcendental and Revolutionary Violence in Fanon" in *Fanon: A Critical Reader* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1996).

[38] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 61.

if they were mere objects for the production of additional objects in the world, it deprives individuals of the products of their engagement with the objective world by claiming them for the advancement of the hegemon's own ends. The fact that the individual's engagement is not genuinely her own is then revealed to her when the products of that engagement are turned against her, such as when the capitalist lives lavishly in a home built by starving peasants, or when one is tasked with enforcing a policy that discriminates against those of one's own ethnicity. Thus we see that though the regime's injustice *itself* consists in its treatment of the individual as if she were a mere tool for its projective ends, poor material conditions are an almost inevitable result of that injustice. Poor material conditions in turn contribute to awakening the impulse towards revolutionary action. Thus when Fanon says that the "starving native" is herself the "truth" of the colonial situation, he means that the native's *existential starvation* by her exploitative situation is the fundamental injustice at the root of her literal starvation.[39]

But where are we to locate the unjust meaning of something as ubiquitous as a "state of affairs"? As we have seen, Fanon provides an existential analysis of the relations that are set in motion by the act of colonization, not an ontological characterization of politics "as such." What he must mean by "the state" then cannot be some ontological or *a priori* designation; on the contrary, to existentialists like Fanon, concepts can only be coherent insofar as individuals take up and produce the kind of reality to which they refer out in the objective world. The points of existence for what is called "the colonial state"

[39] *Ibid.,* 49.

in Fanon's works must be those objective policies and institutions that are produced by human beings that then come to order the political and social situations those human beings exist within and reproduce. This means that the justice or injustice of a particular state lies in the relationship between the principles underlying the existence of its objective institutions and the existential realities upon which those institutions rely. Any action against the injustice of this relationship, then, involves *taking up* what is provided by the colonial world and turning it against itself—or, the terms of the quotation above, taking up the "torch" of objective injustice, which is already there "waiting," to "burn down" that unjust objectivity.[40]

The social and political institutions of the historical-objective world thus hold an ambivalent character for the project of developing of a political situation more harmonious with the human freedoms upon which it relies—and this ambivalence is the basis for the tension in the relationship between inherited objectivity and human freedom. On the one hand, as Fanon writes, "for the native, objectivity is always directed against him": the colonizer determines the set of epistemological, institutional, and social possibilities out of which the individual is able to choose anything at all—and under a specifically colonial order, this set is always disharmonious with her character as being able to *choose* and genuinely *own* her projects. The evidence that she does not own these projects is the material scarcity she experiences *despite* the products her projects contribute to objectivity. On the other hand, the existence of objectivity is also to blame

[40] *Ibid.,* 134.

for the fact that the state can never render the individual freedoms it suppresses entirely null and void, as any determinate objectivity cannot help but provide the individual with opportunities to enact her freedom. The colonizer can never strip the living native of her agency, and given the "misery" caused by the material conditions of her colonization, this agency—understood as the transcendence of human-historical material conditions—can take the form of violence that appears with a concrete sense of urgency.[41]

The Inevitability of Revolutionary Violence

Fanon has made a case for the inexorability of human freedom by showing that objectivity which might have at first seemed only to be an obstacle for the enactment of freedom is in fact a condition of the necessity of freedom's enactment. However, he also makes two further claims: first, that the specific form that this enactment takes in the colonial context is that of revolutionary violence, and second, that this revolutionary violence is an *inevitability*. As he writes, "for the native, this violence represents the absolute line of action. The militant is also a man who works… [and] to work means to work for the death of the settler."[42] And again:

> ...if the native had any tendency to fall asleep and to forget, the settler's hauteur and the settler's anxiety to test the strength of the colonial system would remind him at every turn that the great showdown cannot be put off indefinitely.[43]

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[41] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* 224.
[42] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* 85.
[43] *Ibid.,* 53.

As such, now that we have uncovered some of the ironies of the relationship between freedom and the suppression of that freedom for our collective political life, we must now uncover the irony, specific to colonialism, that leads necessarily to the violent destruction of colonial objectivity. In short, our question is why Fanon sees the colonized individual as being *destined* to "take up" her political situation in a specifically violent fashion.

The fundamental contradiction of colonialism is that the colonizer must acknowledge the freedom of the individuals he colonizes in order to exploit their ability to work on the world to his advantage. In the colonizing moment, he subsumes that freedom within his own by dominating the individual's aims and projects as if they were mere instruments for his projective use, rather than singular expressions of the individual's own projective involvements in the world of objectivity. While the *force* such an imposition requires leads to the experience of the arbitrariness of colonial rule, it also belies the fundamental contradiction at the heart of colonialism, which is that it simultaneously *negates* and *relies upon* the freedom of the individual to take up and maintain her colonial projects. Colonialism would be sustainable if the colonizer could simply annihilate the freedom of the colonized to respond to the arbitrariness of her domination in the form of revolt, but since the freedom of the individual is inexorable, it follows that the individual *herself* would need to be annihilated to annihilate her freedom. But as Nigel Gibson puts it, this in fact "spells the end of colonialism," since with her

death, the individual can no longer take up the projects the regime prescribes for her that will order objectivity in its favor.[44]

In addition, Sartre tells us that the very position of the privileged class prevents it from offering genuine, "good faith" support to those who aim to dismantle the objective order that privileges it.[45] We see Fanon pick up this insight when he writes that

> the native has always known that he need expect nothing from the other side. The settler's work is to make even dreams of liberty impossible for the native. The native's work is to imagine all possible methods for destroying the settler.[46]

In other words, it is unrealistic to think that the colonizer will surrender his privileged position to the colonized without a fight. This is consistent with the difficulty we saw Hegel describe in the master/slave relationship, in which one individual attempts to force another to recognize her as the one and only absolute being. Since the strategy used by the master incoherently contradicts the slave's character as self-conscious and free, it is the colonized that must be the one who is "destined" to eventually act in accordance with her character as self-conscious and free, bringing the contradictory principle of colonialism to its "logical conclusion."[47] And as we have seen, that this inevitability take the form of violence is encouraged by the existential violence that is always already being done by the colonizer:

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[44] Nigel Gibson, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination* (Polity Press, 2013), 109.
[45] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (Schoken, 1965), 42.
[46] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* 93.
[47] Gibson, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination,* 109.

> In fact, as always, the settler has shown him the way he should take if he is to become free. The argument the native chooses has been furnished by the settler, and by an ironic turning of the tables it is the native who now affirms that the colonialist understands nothing but force. The colonial regime owes its legitimacy to force and at no time tries to hide this aspect of things.[48]

However, we again face the following problem: if the colonizer's use of violence was inherently unjust, how can this turning of the tables—which is also violent—be said to be just? As we have said, the colonizing act is based on a contradictory principle: its ultimate end is the destruction of that which it in fact relies upon for its existence. But the overlooked insight of Fanon's analysis is that revolutionary violence is contradictory in the same way: whereas the colonizer sought to destroy the freedom it relied upon to maintain its ordering of objectivity, the free individual now acts to destroy the very objectivity upon which she relies to act at all. In other words, in revolutionary violence, a self-contradictory act that institutes an ontologically unjustifiable situation is met with another self-contradictory act, paradoxically bringing the situation back into "balance" with itself in a way that actually reckons with the previously ignored reality of individual freedom.[49] In the process, it *produces* something that operates for the situation in a way that is actually *conducive* with individual freedom. This is what commentators such as Gordon point to when they write that for Fanon, the assertion of individual freedom

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[48] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* 84.
[49] *Ibid., 88.*

against a world that disavows it is directed at "the possibility, fragile though it may be, of a world that is not by dint of its very structure violent."[50]

What we have said so far suggests that for Fanon, neither consciousness of the necessity nor consciousness of the justice of revolutionary violence is achieved by thinking about one's political situation in a theoretical or abstract way. Since our thinking is always conditioned by the values embedded within our objective institutions and practices, thinking in a way that runs contrary to those values always appears to be illegitimate from the situated point of view of individual thought. This means that if revolutionary consciousness is to become a reality, it must be the *experience* and not the *thinking* of objectivity that both conceals and reveals the truth of that objectivity, which is that the human freedom that provides it with its foundation is being oppressed in ways that contradict its very existence. The experience of the arbitrariness of the regime's impositions illustrates this point, as it is in this experience the individual is met with objectivity in a way which leads her to intuit its fundamental disharmony with the character of her own existence—and this is ultimately what leads her to experience her material conditions as an injustice worthy of a violent response.

The inevitability of revolutionary violence is also assured by the fact that in providing products of her labour to the colonizing nation, the colonized will inevitably become aware of her status as exploited. Try as they might, the colonizers can never

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[50] Gordon, "Fanon's Tragic Revolutionary Violence" in *Fanon: a Critical Reader* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1996), 306.

separate the experience of the colonized from awareness that her labour benefits the non-colonial world:

> But still on the level of immediate experience, the native, who has seen the modern world penetrate into the furthermost corners of the bush, is most acutely aware of all the things he does not possess. The masses by a sort of (if we may say so) childlike process of reasoning convince themselves that they have been robbed of all these things.[51]

In other words, one political order violently benefits from the exploitation of another, this relation is never experienced by those who are exploited as a mere fact. On the contrary, the benefit of the colonizer is experienced as an *operative force* on the very lived experience of the colonized, insofar as the labour of the colonized is required for that benefit. And as Fanon points out, despite the fact that this labour provides the colonizers with favourable objective circumstances, the colonizers posit the colonized as "guilty," or as somehow deserving of their relative relegation.[52]

In summary, what we have said about the inevitability of revolutionary violence can be reduced to the fact that the colonized, in Fanon's words, are "never convinced of their guilt."[53] The colonizers impose upon the natives an arbitrary and illegitimate designation, and the artificiality of that designation is revealed in the experience of the

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[51] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* 74.

[52] *Ibid.,* 52. In the colonial case Fanon describes, this sense of guilt is imposed by the way in which the colonizers posit the distinction between blackness and whiteness.

[53] *Ibid.*

natives in the violence that is being done to their existential characters. This is not revealed through a process of intellectual reflection, but rather in the native's very experience of the colonial world. What is revealed in that experience is that the only difference between the supposedly innocent and the supposedly guilty is their contingent positions relative to an ontologically bankrupt racial hierarchy. We will now look at how the violence that results from these revelations in the experience of the native must appear if it is to be genuinely revolutionary according to Fanon's account of anti-colonialist action.

Fanon's Violence as Political Subjectivity

As we have seen, Fanon's picture of genuine revolution does not begin with the consciousness that the state ought to grant each individual's "fair share" in terms of material conditions. Instead, it is the inevitable result of the sense one gets from one's experience that the operating principle of the state of affairs violates the existential character of the individuals upon which it relies—that is, once the psychical inferiority complex imposed by the regime has been exposed to the individual as a means of control. But there is another sense in which the fulfillment of material interests is posterior to the justification for revolutionary action, and I claim that it provides the basis for the distinction between just and unjust revolutionary violence in Fanon's thought—or in other words, for the distinction between revolutionary and non-revolutionary violence. As we have seen, violence is justified in advance for Fanon insofar as it genuinely targets the

unjust meaning of the regime it aims to overturn. In consequence, violence must *not* be genuinely revolutionary if it merely aims to assure the *interests* of those who were previously disadvantaged by the present state of affairs. As Fanon puts it, "African unity can only be achieved through the upward thrust of the people, and under the leadership of the people, that is to say, in defiance of the interests of the bourgeoisie."[54] Thus we see that for Fanon, violent acts are genuinely revolutionary—and therefore justified in advance—insofar as they take the regime's principle of exploitation as its target, and *not* the fulfillment of the interests of disenfranchised individuals or groups.

Fanon marks the distinction between genuine and ingenuine revolutionary action along the line of the fulfillment of interests because he recognizes that "self-interests"—though they may genuinely refer to the self, to differing degrees—refer most of all to the present order of objectivity. Acting so as to fulfill such interests therefore only reinforces the very state of affairs that revolutionary action aims to dismantle. Whereas revolutionary action takes aim at the arms enforcing the values to which those interests refer, fulfilling those interests affirms the situation's values and the arms that enforce them. In addition, as Fanon insightfully points out, the colonial case is distinct when it comes to the legitimacy of its objective context's values, as the interests of the individual living and thinking according to that context were in fact "transmitted" from the colonizing nation the regime, making them arbitrary to a higher degree than when a

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[54] *Ibid.,* 164.

society's values are homegrown.[55] Overturning the terms of one's objective context in the way that is demanded by the unjust meaning of colonialism, then, is not going to be achieved by "winning" according to the colonizer's system of values.

With this claim that contamination by individual interests disqualifies acts of violence from being genuinely revolutionary, Fanon's revolutionary violence departs from our common understanding of the violent act as aiming to assure some situational advantage for the actor. Another aspect of this common understanding that Fanon's account avoids is that violence is primarily about the destruction of existence. That is, Fanon's revolutionary violence involves the *rehabilitation* of existence against its domination by the destructive principle of colonialism. This rehabilitation can be seen throughout the revolutionary process. First, in enacting violence against colonial objectivity, the individual rehabilitates her own existence as a subject by taking back control and ownership over her projects from the colonizer. Second, the relationship between the colonized individual—as freely projective—and the content of her world—as instrumental to the enactment of her projects—is rehabilitated, as she finally comes into a direct relationship with both her labour and its products; in so doing, she destroys the colonizer's unjust mediation between herself and her products and comes into an appropriate relationship with those products. Lastly, revolutionary violence in fact rehabilitates against the "atmosphere of violence" that has characterized the political situation up to this point, as the destruction of colonialism and its replacement with a less

[55] *Ibid.,* 47.

violent principle for the relationship between the objective world and the human beings who shape it will produces a political order better suited to the existential character of the human beings it relies upon.[56] Although these changes are illegitimate—and therefore violent—from the point of view of the old order, they are also *creative* in that they allow the individual, objectivity, and the political ordering of both to begin to flourish according to the projective character of human freedom.

This relegation of destruction to being almost incidental to what is mainly a creative process points to the conclusion that the ultimate aim of Fanon's revolutionary violence lies not in its effects, but in the act of violence itself. That is, our active participation in such violence reminds us of the necessity of our role in the cultivation and creation of objectivity. In this way, Fanon's violent act takes Sartre's definition of truly free action, which is that they *let go* of the pre-established meaning of the objectivity we encounter and allow its institutions to *develop* in ways that reflect our ongoing negotiation with our alienation.[57] Whether this means burning certain buildings or ignoring the verdicts of certain courts, it is always *violent* to what those buildings and verdicts previously stood for, and it always opens up additional avenues for individuals to transcend—in a *creative* way—the world to which those buildings and courts refer in ways she finds to be most attuned with her character as free and projective.[58] Therefore, the significance of revolutionary violence for the individual does not begin or end with

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[56] *Ibid.,* 70.
[57] Sartre, *Search for a Method*, 165.
[58] *Ibid.*

the destruction of colonialism, as this kind of violence is primarily about the *creation* of novel conditions for objectivity. As Robert Bernasconi rightly emphasizes, the political subjectivity the individual claims in such an act "does not arise only from the departure of the colonizers as a result of decolonization. It arises from the conflict."[59]

However, though we have seen that the impetus for one's participation in this conflict is found in the one's very *experience* of the situation—and not by way of reflection about that experience—Fanon seems to follow Sartre in his provision that there ought to be a *telos* guiding that participation, once consciousness of its necessity gets off the ground. But the two figures differ as to how this guiding principle ought to be specified in advance. On the one hand, Sartre specifies the aim to be the *totalization of all humanity* such that History comes to have "one meaning" for all involved.[60] However, since we are not likely to happen upon the achievement of such a specific and arduous aim without that aim in mind, he also claims that it must be held "self-consciously" by each acting individual.[61] This allows it to "cut across the field of instrumental possibilities" by conditioning one's encounters with the world against what may be one's immediate proclivity to use its objects to fulfill one's own interests.[62] On the other hand, Fanon does not provide strict parameters for the *telos* of his revolutionary violence,

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[59] Robert Bernasconi, "Casting the Slough: Fanon's New Humanism for a New Humanity" from *Fanon: a Critical* Reader, 117.

[60] Sartre, *Search for a Method,* 90.

[61] *Ibid.*, 128. Sartre also thinks that the possibility of holding this telos self-consciously only happened with the advent of Marxism and the emergence of the kind of capitalism that spawned the proletariat class. For this claim, see Sartre's *Search for a Method*, 89.

[62] *Ibid.,* 111.

saying only that it must be guided by "an idea of man and of the future of humanity."[63] This only suggests in general terms that, first, we ought to acknowledge each individual as free in the way we've described, and second, we ought to look towards future possibilities instead of subscribing to the present ordering of relations; but other than these two provisions, no specific program is prescribed. Bernasconi calls this the "empty marker" of Fanon's thought.[64]

But why does Fanon leave the aim of his revolutionary violence an empty marker? While both he and Sartre intend that their accounts guard the revolutionary act against contamination by individual interests, Fanon's less specific approach is—paradoxically—better suited to preventing the act's contamination by the *ultimate* one-sided interest, which is that of establishing an authoritarian regime that merely reproduces the same kind of violence as colonialism—only with a superficially distinct master at the helm. Sartre is confident that imposing the aim of totalization ensures that the act includes all of humanity, but he fails to acknowledge that it is impossible, in practice, to ensure in advance that each individual is recognized as a free and equal being by those acting towards this supposedly all-encompassing *telos*. Such selective blindness can lead to the kind of movement that claims to aim towards totalization but is in fact exclusionary and even exploitative.

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[63] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* 203.
[64] Bernasconi, 119.

Instead of imposing an ultimate end for revolutionary violence that could be applied in a similarly unjust way, Fanon conceives the violent act *itself* such that it always already includes the good aimed at by Sartre's prescription that politics aim towards totalization. That is, the violence Fanon prescribes aims not at the contingent particularities of the regime—such as the individuals who do its bidding—but rather at the wilful misrecognition and unjust ordering of objectivity that are constitutive of the regime's more general principle of exploitation. Given that it aims not at the colonizers as human beings but rather at the coercive principle upon which the colonizers act, this violence ultimately aims at *unifying* the inhabitants of the nation against the imposition of inequality by its foreign occupiers. This is what Fanon means when he claims that this understanding of revolutionary violence brings into being a "new humanity," since it entails "a struggle which mobilizes all classes of people and which expresses their aims and their impatience" with a system that covers over their essential equality.[65] That this "new humanism" is based on the presumption of universal quality can be seen when Fanon writes that

> the colonial system encourages chieftaincies and keeps alive the old confraternities. Violence is in action all-inclusive and national. It follows that it is closely involved in the liquidation of regionalism and tribalism… This destruction is the preliminary to the unification of the people.[66]

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[65] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 246.
[66] *Ibid.,* 94.

Here, we not only see additional evidence that Fanon's violence does not aim specifically at the wholesale destruction of individuals or objects, but we also see what must be destroyed if an act is to be considered genuinely revolutionary violence, which is the very partiality Sartre attempts to eradicate by imposing the aim of totalization as the *telos* of just violence. The crucial difference between the two accounts, then, is that whereas Sartre's aim can actually be leveraged to justify oppression by only allowing some individuals to participate in the "totalizing" movement, Fanon's violence takes direct aim at the sources of oppression that stand in the way of the potential for a genuine process of totalization in the first place, making Fanon's violence better able to avoid producing yet another oppressive state of affairs.

One could explain this divergence between Fanon and his predecessor by way of the bias that comes with thinking according to different lived positions. Whereas Fanon begins his analysis from the point of view of "the native and the underdeveloped man," Sartre begins from a point of view within the "mother country," far from the colonial front.[67] This may explain why Fanon is better able to guard his account against contamination by individual interests, since, as we have seen, it is the oppressed that can directly access the injustice of their situation by way of their experience of the values embedded within their situation as having been determined arbitrarily. Whereas totalization may unjustly impose one "idea of freedom" from above, Fanon's revolutionary violence focuses on the way in which the freedom of all is enhanced by the

[67] *Ibid., 81.*

freedom of the oppressed. As he writes, in the revolutionary struggle, "the interests of one will be the interests of all, for in concrete fact *everyone* will be discovered by the troops, *everyone* will be massacred—or *everyone* will be saved."[68] This is not to say that the bias that comes with privilege precludes impartial thought, but as we saw in the previous section, Sartre himself argues that social and political values determine our projective ends, while Fanon reveals that individualism was a hegemonic value imposed by the privileged class.[69] Since the injustice of colonialism is revealed in the experience of the colonized, the colonized are in the best position to think alternative ways of being that avoid instituting similarly oppressive structures.

Lastly, although Fanon thinks that violent revolt against an oppressive regime is inevitable, his account also acknowledges that some individuals may respond to this inevitability with differing degrees of reticence. Insofar as we all have the existential character of being free, we are all capable of participating in revolutionary violence. But we can also deny this character by denying the opportunity to transcend an unjust objectivity. Fanon confirms this when he writes that every "onlooker" to the revolutionary movement is "either a coward or a traitor." [70] In the first case, she operates on a *bad faith* belief that she is not the kind of being capable of shaping objective institutions, though she always already shapes them; in the second, she is in *bad faith* about the character of other subjects, treating them as if they were mere objects while

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[68] *Ibid.,* 47.
[69] Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 42; Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 47.
[70] *Ibid.,* 199.

simultaneously relying on their subjective freedom to cooperate with the present state of affairs.[71] She thus takes a sort of road of least resistance, lying to herself so as to avoid the difficulty of enacting her freedom to negotiate with her objective circumstances. This means that though the onlooker exists, delaying the decision to revolt is not only unjust in that it allows an unjust state to continue, but it is also at odds with the individual's own existential character as capable of deciding—through her own projective action—about the suitability of her situation for her character as free and projective.

Concluding Remarks

We now understand the impetus for Fanon's demand that specifically material violence be enacted against the injustice of the colonial regime. Violence is always and in the last instance *material*, as it is always enacted *on* and *within* in a situation that is made up of material conditions. The inevitability of violence against a specifically colonial regime does not disqualify it from having qualitative moral significance. On the contrary, though the path towards this violence is begun from the moment of colonization, violence—if it is to be revolutionary in Fanon's strict sense—must take particular and specific aim at the unjust truth of the regime. And whereas the aim of fulfilling individual interests contaminates the act's motivation and inevitably leads to an unjust distribution of material conditions, the aim of destroying the system that distributes based on the

[71] For the precise meaning of "bad faith" for the existential tradition, see Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (Gallimard: 1943), Part One Chapter Two.

oppression of certain individuals to the benefit of others produces the novel possibility of a non-oppressive state of affairs.

Thus we can conclude from Fanon's account that the destruction of particular aspects of materiality does not by necessity make violence mere terrorism, nor a vengeful oppression of one's oppressors. Instead, violence produces novel improvements to the situation that will allow individuals to find meaningful and productive opportunities within it. The enactment of revolutionary violence, then, may be the most existence-affirming moment of political life for the individual who is situated within an unjustly ordered set of material and political circumstances.

Chapter Two

Revolutionary Violence as the Difficult 'Truth' of Political Life:

On Badiou's "New Humanism"

"The native and the underdeveloped man are today political animals in the most universal sense of the word."

Frantz Fanon[72]

Introduction

As we saw in the previous chapter, political life includes within itself the revelation of an impetus to take up our capacity for transcendence in a specifically revolutionary and violent way. However, while Fanon, in his emphasis on phenomenological method, is well able to describe both our capacity for transcendence and its effects for our objective circumstances, he does not provide the ontological conditions of possibility of the eventual enactment of this capacity. Although such an inquiry would take us out of the realm of strict phenomenological analysis, I argue that an ontological analysis allows us to better account for the immense *difficulty* involved in the possibility of revolutionary action that makes itself plain in any phenomenological description of it.

The omission of an ontological basis for the possibility of transcendence is significant for thinking the possibility of revolution for two reasons. First, it prevents us

[72] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Présence Africaine, 1963), 81.

from supporting the ontological claim, put forward by the existentialists, that since the human beings is capable of transcendence according to her very being, *every* human being must be capable of transcendence. And if we cannot prove that every human being is capable of transcendence, the decision to enact that transcendence has a different moral quality. Importantly for the present project, this would affect whether or not the decision to enact revolutionary violence can be judged in terms of its justice, since, after all, Fanon's appeal for revolutionary violence was a *moral* appeal. Second, the omission of an ontological explanation for the reality of revolution prevents us from explaining how we can begin to think in a way that genuinely differs from the way that has been set out by the conditions of objectivity that surround and condition that thinking. This limits our ability to assert that transcendence involves a genuinely *fundamental* overturning of the conditions we are presented with in any present situation. And as we saw in the previous chapter, this overturning must be *fundamental* if it is to genuinely reckon with the injustice of a regime. As such, the question that remains in the advent of Fanon's "new humanist" revolutionary violence is the following: what are the ontological conditions that guarantee that *all* human beings can come to think in favor of transcending the present constitution of their situations in a *fundamental* way?

The following chapter uses Badiou's ontology of what he calls "the event" in an attempt to address this omission in Fanon's "new humanist" understanding of violence. The first section reveals the influence of existentialism on Badiou's ontology in order to demonstrate its attunement to the sense of arbitrariness that we discovered as

accompanying the phenomenon of political life in the previous chapter. The next section shows how Badiou's ontological framework is both attuned to and accounts for the difficulty involved in developing the revolutionary consciousness required for the kind of violence that would be considered by Fanon to be genuinely revolutionary. With the final section, I argue that Badiou goes further than both Fanon and Sartre in ensuring that his account of political novelty is attuned to the conflict between justice and injustice, while still guarding his version of the genuinely revolutionary act against contamination by unjust ends. This argument concludes that Badiou's placement of the "truth" towards which revolutionary action strives *outside* the human-historical situation allows him to account for the observable reality of violent revolution in a way that progresses the existential tradition's understanding of the transcendent coming-to-be of novel conditions for our political being in the world.

Situatedness and the Coercive State

In order to understand Badiou's conception of political life, we must first understand his notion of the "truth," the existence of which for him allows for the possibility of the emergence of genuine novelty into any realm of human life. Whereas our ordinary notion of truth merely describes our *knowledge* of how particular propositions relate to the reality of a given situation, Badiou's notion of truth is "strictly

opposed" to this commonsense, representational notion.[73] In fact, as Ed Pluth points out, subjects to a political truth may not even "know" more about the political situation than other individuals, as the "subjectivized" body can never be an individual who *possesses* the truth by 'knowing' it.[74] Instead, Badiou's notion of truth refers to a universal aspect of the being of existence as such—and this explains why it is not the kind of thing that can be *possessed* by particular individuals. And since knowledge seems to refer to the kind of thing that only exists insofar as it is possessed by individuals, Badiou's notion of truth must be *differ in kind* from knowledge.

To what, then, does Badiou's notion of truth refer, and what is its relation to what we call "knowledge"? Truth for Badiou is what is revealed to be "void to every human situation" as they have already been constituted.[75] Every individual being cannot be presented in all of its infinite meanings by the finite situation we encounter; alternative meanings for each being only exist insofar as they operate as as-yet-unrealized possibilities for the being's mode of existence beyond its specific historical moment.[76] To use an analogy illustrative of Badiou's ontological framework, the "existence" of light in a room requires the existence of its opposite, darkness, to surround it and provide it with its limit. And in fact, the "operation" of darkness on that room is the condition of possibility for light to exist as it does, and any of the darkness can at some point "come to

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[73] Ed Pluth, *Badiou: A Philosophy of the New* (Cambridge: 2010), 89; 118.
[74] *Ibid.,* 105.
[75] Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (University of Minnesota Press: 2003), 117.
[76] Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (Continuum: 2010), 101-103.

be" as light. This analogy also helps us understand Badiou's claim that there is an "ontological infinity of situations," since any amount of darkness can "come to be" as light and vice versa, such that there is an infinite number of possible combinations for the "lightedness" of the room.[77]

Though Badiou gives an *ontological* account of reality in *Being and Event* (1988), his use of the term *situation* demonstrates the influence of the Sartrean phenomenological-existential tradition on his thought.[78] Like Sartre, Badiou uses the term only to refer to specifically *human* realities, such as those within the domains of art, politics, science, or love. These four are the domains of human life that Badiou identifies as those in which (in)existence can come into existence from the void that is operating on the edge of the situation.[79] In non-ontological terms, this means that our engagement with these four aspects of our lives can produce the kind of novelty, within existence, that changes the very operation of the domain itself. To borrow an example from Pluth, impressionism as an art form was always a possibility for human artistic creation, but it only operates as an (in)existent possibility until someone "takes up" their artistic practice

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[77] Steve Corcoran, *The Badiou Dictionary* (Edinburgh University Press: 2015), 368.

[78] Badiou was heavily influenced by Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, which takes as its theme the possibility of the "dialectical surpassing of all that is simply given" that was discussed in the last chapter. Badiou distinguishes his use of the term from that of Sartre only later in his career when he replaces it with the term "world" in *Logic of Worlds* (Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* (Duke University Press: 2011), 58). Though I retain the use of the term "situation" because I am investigating the connection between Badiou and the traditions of existentialism and phenomenology, it is important to note that Badiou replaces the term to emphasize that one situated element, can participate in multiple "worlds" at the same time. For more on individual elements as "infinite multiplicities," see *Logic of Worlds.*

[79] However, Badiou concedes that these four domains need not necessarily exhaust all that makes human life distinct, as other domains for human-historical novelty may arise over the course of our history. For this admission, see Badiou's *Infinite Thought* (Bloomsbury: 2014), page 62.

and materials in to make impressionist art that such art can be considered *as* existent, and in light of the advent of impressionism, realism no longer appears as the absolute and all-encapsulating "truth" of the reality of art.[80]

Badiou takes the distinction between cultural and natural orders from Sartre here: the situation of each of these domains consists of human-historical contributions to the realm that comes to be experienced as if it were "natural" or separable from us.[81] Though it may seem counter-intuitive for Badiou to think of eternal and universal truth relative to the volatile and contingent history of human situations—rather than to consistent nature—he thinks, with Sartre, that it is only in human existence that non-determined novelty can come to be at all. And as we saw Fanon argue in the previous chapter, human beings are the kinds of beings that can *transcend* the conditions of their situations in order to constitute those situations differently.[82] Just as it was for Sartre and Fanon, this capacity for transcendence for Badiou is *the* aspect of human life that distinguishes our activity from that of all other kinds of beings.

This meaning for the term *situation* is to be distinguished from what Badiou calls *the state*. Whereas the situation is tantamount to what I called in the previous chapter the *present constitution of objectivity*, the state is the structure governing how actually existing "elements" are recognized and reproduced as constitutive of that objectivity. In

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[80] Pluth, 119.

[81] Badiou, *Being and Event*, 184.

[82] Pluth, 89. This matches the existentialist tenet that the cultural order is not reducible to the natural order that we in the previous chapter as having been taken up by Fanon from Sartre (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method* (Vintage Books, 1969), 152).

the political domain, the situation consists of those elements that are recognized as having a "meaning" relevant to political life, such as those elements that are recognized as the citizens or institutions of a particular nation. The *state*, on the other hand, determines those elements that can be recognized as citizens and institutions in the first place. In a given situation, some works are not yet recognized as art, some individuals are not yet considered to be politically relevant, some forms of love are not yet experienced as love, and some scientific discoveries are yet to be discovered. Before these novelties are recognized as having *always already been* "truly" artistic, political, lovely, or scientific, they did not yet exist *as* art, politics, love, or science—and it is the state that determines what can and cannot be in these ways *in advance* for any present situation.[83]

Badiou uses the set-theoretical term "element" rather than the term "subject" to describe the entity participating in the process of change. This is because every entity that participates in the process of novelty need not be human. Whereas human beings are the only entities that can *self-consciously* negotiate with their circumstances, this self-conscious negotiation involves engaging non-human entities, making them essential to the process of generating novelty. For example, the situated "subjects" for the artistic novelty of postmodernist poetry include not only the postmodern artists but also all of the other situated realities that come to "participate" in the recognition of postmodernism as genuinely artistic—in this case, the poems themselves, the paper upon which the poems were written, their space, their time. The term "element" is better able to include both

[83] Badiou, *Being and Event,* 109.

human and non-human entities as participating in the coming-to-be of novelty. In addition, unlike the term "subject," the term "element" allows us to conceptualize all participants in the process as essentially or ontologically equal, regardless of whether or not they have specifically human capacities. Although the reality of novelty concerns only the domains of *human* life, each existence that supports the coming-to-be of novelty is equally essential to the process, even insofar as human individuals are the ones who get to *decide* whether and how to "take up" which aspects of existence in order to follow through on a possibility.

As is well known, Badiou does not only use set theory to *conceptualize* ontology; he also thinks that ontology is *equivalent to* set theory—set theory being the function allowing for change in the beings that come to "count" for our experience of the four domains.[84] As such, Badiou understands the relationship between existing elements according to the mathematical theory that "given any element of a set, its singleton is a part, and since a singleton 'corresponds' to every presented element, there are at least as many parts as elements" in the set.[85] Applied to the relationship between the state and the situation, this means that the state, as the principle determining which elements are and are not presented in the situation, is "*at least* as numerous as the situation."[86] If there are existent elements beyond the situation, those elements must have been excluded from the

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[84] While I do not address his equation of mathematics and ontology in the present project, this is an essential avenue for further scholarship.
[85] Badiou, *Being and Event*, 288.
[86] *Ibid.*, 288.

situation by the state. But given, as we have said, that the ontological situation is one of infinity, the state is precisely the *coercion* of infinite possibility into a particular set of finite actuality.[87] The problem of the relationship between the situation and the state is that since we, as situated beings, cannot measure how far the state's determination exceeds the situation from our point of view within the situation, we are prone to assuming that all possibilities for the four domains have been included within the sphere of our experience.[88] The consequence of this ontological state of affairs is that our very experience of the state as a "measureless power" blinds us to the state's concealing of alternative possibilities for being, and in fact *conceals that very concealing*.[89] In the political domain, this concealing can be as subtle as in the modern world's imposition of parliamentarian-capitalism such that thinking communism becomes impossible.

However, while this means that what Badiou calls "the state" is inherently coercive of all of situated existence, thinking through the dynamics of its coercion can show us the conditions of possibility for the change we incite and experience *in situ* and

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[87] *Ibid*, 109.

[88] Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy* (SUNY Press: 1992), 80.

[89] Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* (Continuum: 2009), 70. My interpretation here alludes to Heidegger's *forgetting of our forgetting* of the question of Being. I make this connection because in Badiou's thought, the state seems to be that which causes us to forget Plato's assertion of the existence of a universal "idea" beyond the contingencies of the sensible world—truths which are in fact the basis of being as such. Ruda similarly formulates this aspect of Badiou's thought as a gesture pointing towards our forgetting of the forgetting of the distinction between finity and infinity (Frank Ruda, "Conditioning Communism: Badiou, Plato and Philosophy as Meta-Critical Anamnesis" from *Badiou and the Political Condition* (Edinburgh University Press: 2014), 6). Forgetting this distinction causes us to be relativistic about the character of finitude, cutting us off from the possibility of thinking that a genuinely 'more just' state of affairs is possible.

reveal the hidden state metastructure.[90] In order for one existence to be said to coerce another, the existence that coerces must be *outside* and *separate from* the existence it coerces. And since, as we have said, the state coerces the situation, the existence of the state must be outside and separate from that of the situation. This means though the state as metastructure is ultimately up to our own formulation of it, it can come to be experienced as a coercive, *foreign* imposition.[91] And as we saw in the last chapter, the experience of foreign imposition is accompanied by the possibility that we experience the imposition as arbitrary. And as we also saw, such an experience of arbitrariness can lead to the assertion that it is possible that existence can be otherwise—as we saw in the phenomenon of revolution as described by Fanon in the previous chapter. Thus it is in thinking Badiou's ontology along with Fanon's phenomenology that we can see that the very experience of the state includes within it the possibility of asserting the existence of that which it excludes from the situation, even as this exclusion makes such an existence, strictly speaking, unknowable and unforeseeable from a situated point of view.

However, our inability to reveal exactly *how much* the metastructure excludes from the situation means that asserting that it excludes *any* reality requires a sort of "leap

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[90] The term "coercive" here does not always hold its negative connotation. The state of affairs may coerce individuals into genuinely reckoning with their being as transcendences. The point is that the state always conditions the individual's being and thinking in a way that is not immediately apparent to her being and thinking.

[91] Badiou, *Being and Event,* 110-111. This is not to say that the character of the state has nothing to do with our actions; on the contrary, the state's arms come into being by way of our choices—whether it be the parliament, the art museum, the institution of marriage, or the scientific paradigm. But it is when these institutional arms are experienced as the *only arbiters of what is possible* for politics, art, love, and science that they are the coercive arms of the state.

of faith," one which Badiou calls throughout his works "the assertion of the existence of truths." This assertion is based on an experience of what Badiou calls "the event," which, in contrast to Fanon's understanding of the impetus for revolution as spurring from the principle of domination that is *immanent* to the colonial situation, necessarily stands *outside of* and *opposed to* all that has been allowed by the state to be "knowable" from within the situation. However, understanding why following through on this event requires a "leap of faith" demands a clear picture of his principal distinction between the existence of "truth" and that of "knowledge," including how this distinction relates to the relationship we have described between the state and the situation.

Badiou follows the Platonic tradition's rigorous use of the term "truth": if something is to be worthy of the designation, it must be true *universally and eternally*, or in other words "beyond" the contingencies of how things have come to be determined and sedimented in a particular situation or state of affairs. When we happen upon a new way to paint, a new way to govern, an unlikely love, or another law of physics, it must have been the case that all of these possibilities were "true" before our situated participation in them *as* what they have been revealed to be; this new way to paint was always beautiful, this new way to govern was always more inclusive, this physical law always acted upon the physical world, and we always would have loved our beloved—yet their existence as beautiful, inclusive, absolute, or lovely could never have been foreseen according to the previous rules governing what can be considered to be constitutive of

human reality.[92] And insofar as they can be in these ways in any possible situation, truths are "trans-situational"—or, to use the terms of the Platonic tradition to which Badiou is faithful—"universal" and "eternal."

Knowledge, on the other hand, refers to the particularities of the situation as they have already been determined by the state. In Badiou's words, the situation is the sum of all that is already "circulating within it," making the human situation an "encyclopedia of knowledges" already thought or experienced by the elements within the situation.[93] This means that knowledge, on its own, is incapable of generating novelty; it is merely the "retrospective totalization" of what once came into being as a novel reality.[94] Sartre's influence on Badiou's progressive notion of truth can be seen when Sartre affirms that

> So long as thought watches over its own movement, all is truth or a moment of truth… Our present ideas are false because they have died before us. There are some which reek of carrion and others which are very clean little skeletons; it amounts to the same thing.[95]

Here we see that both figures mark the same distinction between truth and knowledge. If thought is limited to pre-established ideas about the constitution of objectivity, it is stuck

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[92] It may be objected that inclusivity is not the ideal towards which the genuinely political strives. However, it seems to me that Badiou here gestures towards the ideal of equality. And if we follow this existential-phenomenological reading of Badiou, we can further claim that this equality refers to *our capacity to enact transcendence*. This means that the more inclusive our political reality strives to be, the more accommodating it will be to the enactment of transcendence by *all* individuals.

[93] Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (Verso: 2012), 67.

[94] Badiou, *Being and Event*, 416; Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 62.

[95] Sartre, *Search for a Method*, 111. However, we must keep in mind here that Badiou rejects Sartre's imposition of the aim of *totalization* on political action, presumably for the same reasons we saw in our explanation of Fanon's rejection of totalization in the previous chapter.

in a dead past in which ideas can only be repetitively thought and reproduced. On the other hand, if at any moment it transcends those pre-established ideas and reckons with what is actually an ever-changing set of possible constitutions the meaning of beings, it is in a self-conscious movement towards becoming other than itself, making it the kind of transcendence that marks human life as distinct.

However, Badiou's account pushes past that of Sartre in accounting for the possibility of novelty, and this can be seen in the relationship we can draw between the distinction of truth and knowledge and that between state and situation. Whereas truth names the infinite set of possibilities that are limited and excluded by the state, the encyclopedia of knowledges names the finite set that already constitutes the situation. In simpler terms, the state is the determining principle excluding truth from the situation's encyclopedia. Ed Pluth clarifies this web of distinctions by drawing a comparison between Heidegger and Badiou: though truth for both figures is something we always *inhabit*, the statements we make about it on the basis of that inhabiting are destined to distort it.[96] This is not to say that Badiou assigns a negative normative value to all of the situated particulars that make up the "realm of knowledges." On the contrary, the aspects or "elements" that make up the knowable situation must actively and processually participate in the coming-to-be of novelty if truth is to have any sort of concrete reality. Against the tendency to endlessly repeat different variations of the same core phenomena, the elements circulating the "realm of knowledges" strive towards something *beyond*

[96] Pluth, 89.

them. This striving of factical being towards a state of being beyond its present facticity is precisely the notion of "transcendence" that pushes past that of Sartre in Badiou's thought.

This relationship between the realms of truth and knowledge allows us to understand why like a "leap of faith" *beyond the situation* is required for us to assert the existence of truths. According to Badiou's ontology, a truth is a possibility outside of every possible situation, while the encyclopedia of knowledges catalogues what is already recognizable as "real" within a particular one. A truth which is found in a particular situation*,* then, must have lost its universality in exchange for becoming *as particular existence*—meaning that it has in fact lost its character as truth, having moved out of the infinite "void" beyond all situations and into a finite and particular one. This means, importantly, that truth comes into being as its own opposite, or as an item catalogued in the situation's encyclopedia of knowledges. As Ed Pluth aptly puts it, a truth is "destined to become something other than truth (knowledge, precisely) as the price of its success."[97] But if truth loses its character *as truth* in exchange for the kind of existence that would allow those elements within the situation to have direct and experiential access with it, any experience we have with it *before* it makes this "bargain" must be on the basis of *faith* in that which is not (yet) strictly knowable. And if we cannot directly experience truths *as* truths, asserting their existence as true requires that we

[97] Badiou, *Being and* Event, 377; Pluth, 119.

"leap" towards asserting realities "beyond" the finite, knowable realm in which we are always already situated.

Now that we have considered Badiou's ontological account of the relationship between a seemingly infinite state and the truly infinite existence beyond it, the question remains as to how we, as situated beings, can become *experientially aware* of the reality of infinity such that we can 'leap' towards asserting that reality in the first place. How do we *begin* to experience the coercive state *as* coercive, such that it comes to be experienced as arbitrary in the way that can motivate us to act towards other possible ways of being? Badiou's answer to this question lies in what he calls "the event." The event is a "local disruption" of the pre-established relationship between the state as seemingly infinite and the finite elements it has allowed to constitute the situation.[98] It is an occurrence *within the situation* that reveals that the state has not been truthfully all-encompassing in its determination of the encyclopedia of knowledges—or in other words, that the state has coerced the situation into finitude.[99] As various scholars have pointed out, Badiou's account of the possibility of revolution does not rely any sort of heroic voluntarism, nor on a self-generated flash of insight. On the contrary, Badiou shows that without some sort of "event" to disrupt the individual's experience of her contingent and situated involvements as if they were absolutely necessary, situated thought would be

[98] Badiou, *Logics of Worlds,* 70.
[99] Badiou, *Metapolitics* (Verso: 2012)*,* 144.

"powerless" to transcend these endlessly repetitive involvements so as to generate opportunities for novel ones.[100]

Badiou's account of the event seems to give us a predetermined role in the coming-to-be of novelty: since we cannot help but witness the event once it occurs, and since we had no part in its occurrence, it seems that it is the event, and not us, that is wholly responsible for the phenomenon of change. But I argue that the kind of freedom from determination that Sartre and the existentialists describe as our unique existential capacity is itself only possible by way of the sort of eventual occurrence Badiou describes on ontological grounds by invoking his own reading of Platonism. Before the eventual occurrence, situated elements are limited to endlessly repeating the finite set of possible involvements already presented by the situation. And as we have seen, the state is so effective in *concealing its own concealing* of the infinity of possibilities that it can render us unable to think about what might be "beyond" how things already are, as well as unable to affirm possibilities "beyond" present actuality at all.[101] The event suddenly allows the individual to "hope," like never before, that existent and finite reality can one day reflect the (in)existent, infinite ideality. Although this hope can never be fulfilled because of the *a priori* incompatibility of finitude and infinity, this is what Badiou means when he says that hope only involves fidelity to the infinity of possibility, *not* the

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[100] Nina Power, "Towards an Anthropology of Infinitude" in *The Praxis of Alain Badiou* (re.press, 2006), 312; Pluth, 89.
[101] Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 83.

representation of a specific outcome for action.[102] However, this hope can be "raised only through something that exceeds the order of thought," since that order, on its own, is only capable of repeating its own terms, *ad infinitum*.[103] Once enabled by the event, hope will be the thought of acting so as to fundamentally *transcend* the terms of the pre-established order by striving towards a perpetually unattainable ideal; and in the case of politics, this ideal is that of the absolute equality that provides the basis for our real situations of inequality. Thus we see that something is required to "supplement" our situated thought such that we can think and eventually enact our unique human capacity for transcendence, and this is provided by the experience of the event. [104]

We will now explore what is required for any action that follows the event to genuinely reckon with its revelation that the constitution of the finite situation is ultimately arbitrary. Whereas we saw Fanon argue that revolutionary violence against an oppressive regime is inevitable simply on the basis of the relationship between the coercive regime and the individual, Badiou's ontology does not guarantee the eventuality of something like the self-conscious revolutionary consciousness that existentialists think is required for novel transcendence. Although there are infinite possibilities beyond every finite situation, those possibilities need not reveal their existence to the situation by way of an eventual occurrence; and even if they do, the elements of the situation can respond

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[102] *Ibid.,* 95.

[103] Badiou, *Being and Event,* 188.

[104] *Ibid.,* 84. For more on the event as supplement, see Marios Constantinou, *Badiou and the Political Condition* (Edinburgh University Press: 2014).

in an infinite number of ways, and this includes disavowing the (in)existence that the event reveals entirely.[105] This reflects Badiou's attunement to the lived experience of the *difficulty* inherent to the experience of reckoning with the revolutionary moment: witnesses to the possibility of novelty are always tempted to turn their backs on that unknown possibility in favor of the familiar, or to reject what seems merely utopian in favor of acting in ways that are more likely to be successful according to how things have already been established.[106] We begin the next section with the difficulty of this experience in mind.

The Difficult Possibility of a "Politics of Truth"

As we have seen, for Badiou, action that aims to transcend the state's determination of the human situation—or, in Sartrean terms, action that freely transcends objectivity—is only possible on the basis of our bearing witness to an event. However, this bearing witness does not alone guarantee the kind of free and "transcendent" action Sartre describes. On the side of the event itself, though infinite possibility lies in the void beyond every situation, the state's coercion of a particular situation may be so strong that it severely limits the possibility that the situation's elements can assert the existence of truths. Badiou calls situations that are conditioned in this way "atonal worlds," in which the state expressly and severely denies the existence of infinity and affirms a sort of

[105] Badiou, *Being and Event*, 188.
[106] Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, 48.

immanent relativism with regards to what has already been catalogued in the encyclopedia.[107] While the atonal system, *qua* human, always remains open in principle, the consequence of the atonality of a world severely restricts its capacity to participate in novel becoming.[108] On the other side of the event, situated elements with the capacity for thought can think about and then respond to the event in three ways, only one of which affirms our capacity for transcendence in the specifically existential and revolutionary way we have been investigating. First, we can deny the novel possibility for being that is revealed by the event by maintaining the present constitution of objectivity as if it were absolute; second, we can affirm a past constitution of objectivity as preferable to both the present and the unforeseeable future; or third, we can be "faithful" to the truth revealed by the event by acting with the principle that the way the state has already established the situation is not absolute.[109] The first two responses affirm a pre-established constitution of being as if it were necessary, while the third asserts the infinite possibility of novel terms for the constitution of finite being.

This insight that denying our capacity for transcendence means treating past or present constitutions of the situation as if they were necessary leads Badiou to relegate any treatment of necessity to the status of being an *a-political* mode of engagement with existence. As he writes in *Being and Event*, "Politics is a creation, local and fragile, of

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[107] Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 420.

[108] *Ibid.,* 71.

[109] *Ibid.*, 54-65. See here the influence of Sartre's insight, highlighted in the previous chapter, that thinking the character of objectivity to be a determinism is to be in *bad faith* about the existential character of reality.

collective humanity; it is never the treatment of a vital necessity."[110] Badiou here demonstrates his attunement to the difficulty involved in being faithful to the possibility that things could be otherwise than the way one has always known them to be. If following through on possibility were guaranteed in advance as an *a priori* consequence of the situation, it could not be said to be a genuine moment of transcendence over which we could take any meaningful responsibility. This difficulty that we observe as really accompanying the experience of the possibility of novelty thus provides the context for Badiou's exclusion of necessity from the process of transcendence.

But Badiou's conclusion here is in conflict with what we saw in Fanon's thought in the previous chapter. On the one hand, Fanon showed us that the treatment of material scarcity—which appears from within the situation to be the treatment of a vital necessity—is not at the root of the injustice that is transcended by genuinely political action; instead, it was the imposition of an unequal and therefore unjust understanding of equally transcendent human beings that was to blame. This in fact supports Badiou's conclusion about the negative relationship between necessity and transcendence. Indeed, Badiou would agree with what Fanon's analysis revealed in the previous chapter about the capacity of material lack to produce something like revolutionary consciousness; as he says in an interview with *The Critical Inquiry,* "Contrary to Hegel, for whom the negation of a negation produces a new affirmation, I think we must assert today that negativity, properly speaking, does not create anything new. It destroys the old, of course,

[110] Badiou, *Being and Event,* 363.

but it does not give rise to a new creation."[111] However, Fanon also argued that revolution against political injustice is a necessary, *a priori* consequence of the very constitution of the unjust objective situation. This seems to render Fanon's account of transcendence the very "treatment of a vital necessity" Badiou deems to be a-political, since, as we saw, the revolt of the colonized was "furnished by the settler" *in advance* by way of the settler's initial violence against the existential character of the colonized.[112] The present task, then, is to compare Fanon's phenomenology with Badiou's ontology of novel political action to determine whether revolution in the face of a coercive state is a predetermined or an embattled reality for political life.

What has not been sufficiently emphasized in the literature on Badiou is that what makes the powerlessness that comes with our situated position so severe—or in other words, what makes it such that we require the event as a supplement to start us towards transcendence—is the mutually supportive relationship between the encyclopedia of knowledges and the state as coercive metastructure. In contrast to what we saw in Fanon's account, we feel perfectly "at home" in the situation's encyclopedia before the event. The kinds of opinions we can hold about reality have been settled by the state in advance, and these opinions are always already "ready-to-hand" for our judgment of any situation that may arise. As such, we need only consult the encyclopedia's catalogue of these opinions to determine the most strategic possibilities for acting. It is only in bearing

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[111] Badiou, interview with Filippo Del Luchesse and Jason Smith. *The Critical Inquiry*. "We Need A Popular Discipline: An Interview With Alain Badiou," 2008.
[112] Badiou, *Logics of Worlds,* 434; Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 84.

witness to the event—an occurrence that points to something infinitely outside our human "home"—that we can experience the present constitution of objectivity as being ultimately arbitrary. Therefore, Badiou seems to follow Fanon in thinking that this feeling of arbitrariness is at the root of the individual's consciousness that transcendence of the *status quo* includes the possibility of feeling more "at home" in one's being situated in a human-historical context. But whereas Fanon derived this sense of arbitrariness from its effects for revolutionary action, Badiou grounds it in the way in which human thought can access Platonist ideals and compare them with the present state of affairs.

The contribution of an ontological ground for the phenomenon has two consequences for our understanding of the real difficulty involved in enacting faithfulness to a revolutionary possibility. The first is that even if the state is not so severe as to limit the occurrence of events, choosing to be faithful to an eventual occurrence is a process in which we "despair," since it is in this process that we let go of the comfort of feeling "at home" in the encyclopedia.[113] That is, since the truth revealed in the event is always incompatible with the encyclopedia's claim to encompass all possible ways for the world to be, any act that is faithful to an alternative way for the world is always illegitimate, or in other words violent, from the situation's point of view. Further, since the encyclopedia is the context *against which* the individual checks the validity and viability of her choices, the legitimacy of the possibility revealed by the event is

[113]Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 435.

"undecidable" from a standpoint conditioned by that context.[114] In short, to decide to be in a different way than one has always been against the backdrop of a world that denies the legitimacy of that alternative possibility is an embattled process of turning away from surety, both about the world and about one's own role within it.

The second consequence of the mutually supportive relationship between the state and the encyclopedia is that the encyclopedia's affirmation of the state as totalizing obscures the situated individual's view of the partiality and one-sidedness of her situation. This insight about the character of situatedness has been well documented throughout the phenomenological tradition.[115] To use an illustrative analogy, when one has only been exposed to one's own culture's way of doing things, one thinks it to be the only possible way of being. It is only in distancing ourselves from our own "way of doing things" by immersing ourselves in those of others that we see that our own culture has not exhausted all possible ways of being in the world. Similarly, the state coerces the encyclopedia into a particular way of being so strongly that it is only in distancing ourselves from its domination of our thoughts and perspectives that we can think alternative and genuinely novel possibilities. This is what Badiou attempts to avoid when he stipulates that asserting the existence of truth through one's faithful action requires that one "subtract" oneself from the rules governing one's situation and align oneself

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[114] Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 434, 431; Badiou, *Being and Event*, 190.

[115] In particular, this insight has been pointed out by phenomenologists in their analyses of the phenomenon of oppression; for a fascinating and relevant example, see Marilyn Frye's analogy of the bird's partial perspective on its cage in her essay entitled "Oppression" in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (The Crossing Press: 1983).

with the void that is already "subtracted" from inclusion within the situation.[116] And since we are always already involved in the situation in which we find ourselves thrown, such "subtraction" from the state of affairs is a process that involves the entirety of the thinking being.

However, this difficulty at first appears to be insurmountable to situated beings like us. If we are always already situated within a state-encyclopedic context, how can we ever distance ourselves from the state's domination of our perspectives? Badiou's answer lies in the relation between our existential character and that of the event. As thinking beings, we are capable—with the help of the event's "raising up" of our thought from its powerlessness—of *imaginatively distancing* ourselves from that which is presented as absolute by the situation.[117] It is through such a process of imaginative distancing—one which is totally optional, since the opportunity provided by the event need not be taken up by the individual—that a sort of "transcendent consciousness" faithful to the infinity of possibility emerges in human life, one that can transcend determinations of an encyclopedia that presents itself as if it were necessary. Therefore, although Fanon rightly observes that the native's "revolutionary assurance" comes when he "finds out that the settler's skin is not of any more value than a native's skin," he does not explain how this

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[116] Badiou, *Being and Event*, 72.

[117] Though non-thinking beings also participate in the event, this participation does not require distance from the conditioning of the encyclopedia precisely because the participation of non-thinking beings does not require any kind of deliberative decision. In other words, it is because of our unique existential character we require the distancing function provided by the event.

lived experience is possible, and Badiou's ontological explanation of our capacity to think otherwise can bridge this gap in our understanding of the phenomenon.[118]

Now that we have used both figures to uncover the obstacles to revolutionary consciousness, we can address whether it is inevitable or necessary that we come to "take up" the difficult challenge of revolution. I argue that the difference between the two on this issue can be reduced to where they place the truth of the political situation. On the one hand, they both see objectivity as having a fundamentally ambiguous role for the possibility of revolution: though the state-encyclopedic context obstructs and obscures anything other than its own reproduction, human freedom is capable of acknowledging and then leveraging the content of those obstacles and obfuscations to produce a new set of objective conditions. This is precisely the revolutionary transcendence that is thought by the tradition both figures inherit and take up to be *the* uniquely human quality. On the other hand, whereas Fanon placed the truth of the colonial situation in its present injustice, and conceived of revolutionary action as violently targeting that situated presence, Badiou places political truth *beyond* any present and particular situation. When he writes that "enquiries grasp onto discernible multiples that include an indiscernible trajectory," he means that consciousness faithful to the truth revealed by the event brings discernible aspects of its objective world—such as the material conditions of one's life—to participate in a new way of being, one that cannot be determined in advance and yet is

[118] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 45.

always already possible on the basis of the ideal it strives to reflect.[119] For example, as Badiou says in *Logics of Worlds* (2006), truths require particular materials and languages to be produced *in situ*, but the fundamental truth towards which those languages and material conditions are directed in revolutionary action are themselves "separable from all materiality and all languages," since, as we have said, truths are universal to all particular situations.[120] And if truth is placed outside of the realm of existence in this way, the possibility that elements *within the existent situation* will come to participate in the reality of that truth cannot be guaranteed in advance by the very constitution of any particular situation—even the colonial one, though it may at first seem to necessitate its own downfall.

Thinking Badiou's notion of the event alongside Heidegger's description of the experience of what he calls the "call of conscience" may prove helpful here. With the call of conscience, Heidegger points to the individual's experience of hearing a call, from nowhere and no one in particular, that reveals the utter contingency of one's position as thrown. In Heidegger's words, "the call comes *from* me and yet *from beyond me*," in that it cannot be located outside me and yet cannot be discerned as having any specific content.[121] Heidegger explains that hearing the call is a result of the individual's experience of the world as it has been set-up by others as *uncanny*, or as a foreign entity that does not wholly reflect oneself in one's own specificity as a being capable of

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[119] Badiou, *Being and Event,* 417.
[120] Badiou, *Logics of Worlds,* 33.
[121] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 320.

questioning the meaning of Being—or in other words, as a being capable of critical thought about her thrown circumstances. To Heidegger, this call can be taken up as a call to be and act otherwise than how one has always been and acted so as to transform the situation into one in which one sees one's own specificity reflected, or it can be ignored in favor of the comfort of pre-established ways of being. To place this call within Badiou's ontological framework, the world appears to the individual as uncanny only once the eventual supplement reveals that the encyclopedia is not all-encompassing of what is true, such as when something is revealed to be included within the being of the individual element, yet its reality is not reflected in the encyclopedia; in the colonial situation as presented by Fanon, what is omitted from the encyclopedia is the black man's equality with the white man in terms of his capacity for self-conscious transcendence. Badiou's event can thus be understood as the ontological basis for the phenomenal experience of recognizing that things can—and in the human case, *should*—be otherwise—especially in the case of our political situations, which perpetually deny the reality of our essential equality.

We can now see an implicit distinction between revolutionary and non-revolutionary violence operating in Badiou's ontological account of the coming-to-be of political novelty. As we have seen, the state coerces the encyclopedia to *be* in certain ways over others, which in turn coerces the individuals that think according to that encyclopedia to take up the situation's privileging of certain aspects of being. When it comes to our political lives, these aspects of being include the specifically human

capacity to self-consciously *negotiate with* and *think about* one's situation as we are "thrown" into it. But since the state is constructed according to the perspectives of certain individuals, it "chooses" to allow some individuals to enact their actions and thoughts according to their existential character as free, while subordinating the freedom of others to maintaining its hegemony. And given what we said in the previous chapter about the unwillingness of those in power to acknowledge the injustice of its one-sidedness, the state is strongly committed to its own perpetuation, causing its interests to become heavily sedimented structures of the individual's lived experience. Such sedimentation can give the values and institutions of the hegemon the appearance of being absolute, causing the individual to be inclined to act so as to fulfill the interests imposed by those values and institutions—even as they may contradict her own interest in engaging her capacity for transcendence.

In the colonial case presented by Fanon, we see this kind of unjust violence when the colonizer forces the colonized into servitude, strikes down the revolt of the colonized, or attempts to conceal the injustice of its hegemony by positing the entirely un-ontological distinction between blackness and whiteness. In the case of the suppression of the revolt, the use of violence can reveal the arbitrariness of the oppressive state of affairs, while the "colonization of the mind" by the racist distinction between blackness and whiteness can for a time conceal the partiality and one-sidedness of the hegemon's impositions. As such, the kind of violence that genuinely reckons with the injustice of a

state of affairs is a difficult possibility, and one that always requires specifically *material* violence, particularly on the part of those situated on the wrong side of the hegemon.

As such, violence that revolutionizes the situation in the direction of justice holds as its principle that the capacity for transcendence is inherent to all human beings in equal measure, and that the state of affairs ought to reflect this reality by accommodating this capacity for each individual equally. But since we shape human reality according to our partial and one-sided perspectives, our situations never reflect the purity of our essential ontological equality. However, as Badiou argues, this does not preclude the possibility that we, as human beings, can think and imagine otherwise. Although we must rely on the occurrence of the event because of the limitedness of our situated perspectives, the event shows us an alternative way of being that is not limited by the difficulties of material reality. The thought of this alternative way of being allows us to *infinitely strive*—from within our particular, material circumstances—towards a situation that reflects the perfect reality that makes our imperfect reality thinkable. The very act of revolutionary violence, then, reveals that the cultivation of our real and material unequal situations relies on the fact that we are *all* capable of transcendence, and attempts to have the situation *better reflect* this fundamental reality.

However, the fact that our experience of the truth of our infinite equality requires the sort of finite supplement provided by the event means that the very character of the revolutionary action that "takes up" the truth is importantly different from what we saw in the previous chapter. In particular, the justice of political action must be rethought if its

target does not lie within the situation itself, as it did in Fanon's placement of it in the situation's immanent injustice. Further, if our equality always lies outside of our reach as situated human beings, is it not merely utopian to act in the name of that equality? We will now investigate the implications of the differences between the two figures from the perspective of Badiou's account of political life, taking the question of just political action as our theme.

Political Life as Justified Violence

If a situated element surpasses the difficulties involved in affirming the existence of truths, her subsequent action "punches a hole" in the encyclopedia of knowledges, bringing what was previously a possibility inconceivable by the terms of that encyclopedia into the realm of catalogued actuality.[122] Badiou appropriately terms this phenomenon "forcing": in acknowledging that the state has excluded possibilities, one fundamentally alters the conditions of one's situation, "violating established and circulating knowledges" and forcing hitherto (in)existent terms to be recognized as included within the "set" of the domain of human life.[123] This violation of the encyclopedia leads to a new inclusion within it, as universal truth comes into immanent

[122] Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil,* 70.
[123] *Ibid.,* 70.

existence as a particular reflection of the truthful ideal towards which the faithful act originally aimed.[124]

However—and importantly—this forcing cannot take the form of appealing to the state to include what it has excluded. As the gatekeeper of finitude, the state is *a priori* opposed to infinity; once a possibility comes into particular existence by being included in the situation by the state, it loses its infinite character. And since the state conservatively reproduces and maintains the terms of existence, it is only when existence comes-to-be *independently* from the state that the state's claim to infinity can be revealed to be a mere appearance. We are to blame for this appearance: we produce the state according to our partial perspectives, and then the state affirms and solidifies these perspectives as if they were absolute. But the individual who forces the state to acknowledge a novel actuality circumvents the state's limitation of her perspective and creates a relation to voided possibilities that is "different in essence" from that of the state.[125] The term *forcing* thus takes the freedom described by the term "transcendence," as it has been understood by the existential tradition, and pushes it to a higher register: whereas transcendence in the traditional sense entails the leveraging of objectivity to fulfill some end already within the realm of possibility that has been prescribed by the

[124] Badiou, *Being and Event*, 361.

[125] *Ibid.*, 115. However, given the degree to which the state coerces situated existence, such a novel kind of relating requires some space for freedom from this coercion. This is achieved in human life by our capacity for what was referred to in the previous section as 'imaginative distancing'.

state for objectivity, forcing is the kind of leveraging that incites entirely novel conditions for the very operation of the objective situation.

Importantly for our inquiry into political life, the truth towards which political fidelity strives has the character of being "without reference to any criterion of hierarchy, privilege, competence, or difference."[126] Or, to use the terms of the Platonic tradition, the idea of sameness is the condition of possibility that lies beyond our experience of any particular difference *as* difference. Applying this insight to the ontological framework described above, the true ontological reality operating beyond our real political situations—situations that have always been coerced into asserting the reality of difference over that of sameness—is the possibility of pure and infinite equality. By this account, genuinely political acts are those that assert the (in)existence of equality from a standpoint within unequal existence—or, in simpler terms, those that assert the existence of equality from within an unequal situation.

However, given that equality does not strictly exist, positing the assertion of its existence as the condition of just political action can give the impression that Badiou's revolutionary politics is tantamount to a utopianism, one which could in fact be manipulated to justify authoritarian ends and projects.[127] Badiou admits that these interrelated impressions can arise in reading his work, but contends that it only appears in these ways from a point of view not sufficiently distanced from the encyclopedia. As

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[126] Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil,* 67.

[127] Such as we saw in the previous chapter with Sartre's imposition of totalization as the *telos* for just political action.

regards the first charge, the encyclopedia, and therefore any point of view running through it, can only regard the attempt to circumvent the statist norms it catalogues as a utopian "adherence to ideology."[128] Because the state appears from within the encyclopedia to be all encompassing—in spite of the fact that it actually excludes infinity from existence—it renders the existence of possibilities excluded by the state "undecidable" from the point of view of the encyclopedia. This makes the encyclopedia unable to reliably weigh in on whether assertions of the existence of alternative possibilities for being are "veridical or erroneous."[129] Nonetheless, in its affirmation of the partiality and one-sidedness imposed by the state, the encyclopedia often weighs in on the veridicality of assertions of existences the state has not yet acknowledged, conservatively charging them with the status of utopian impossibility.

As for the charge of authoritarianism, like Fanon before him, Badiou guards against contamination of the transcendent act by injustice by leaving the ultimate aim of political action an "empty marker." This is exemplified by what Badiou says about the kind of hope that accompanies genuinely faithful action, which is that hope is "fidelity to fidelity, and not the representation of a future outcome."[130] Just as Fanon's revolutionary violence was an end in itself insofar as its very enactment reinstated the individual's existential character as transcendence, the *political* aspect of faithful action lies in "the movement of thought and action that frees itself from statist norms," *not* in its particular

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[128] Badiou, *Logics of Worlds,* 90.
[129] Badiou, *Being and Event,* 419; 428.
[130] Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism,* 95.

ends or achievements.[131] In these ways, both figures prevent their thought from being used to justify unjust ends and projects by way of an authoritarian imposition of some ultimately partial and one-sided vision for "the good state."[132]

However, Badiou goes further than Fanon in staving off the threat of authoritarianism by arguing against the tradition's insistence, since Hegel, on the notion of *recognition* as central to just political action—an insistence that Fanon inherits without issue.[133] As Badiou argues, focusing on the particular differences catalogued by the encyclopedia obscures thinking about what is *universally true* across all of those differences. Thought that centers on "recognizing" differences, on the other hand, only further "others" the other by reinforcing precisely what has been arbitrarily imposed by the state and used by the encyclopedia to justify the particular oppressions it catalogues. He raises an ontological point to counter this inheritance, which is that there is the same degree of *ontological* difference between someone and literally *anyone* else, as each individual, *qua* existing, "counts as one" from the point of view of the encyclopedia—even if the situation may cover over this ontological equality with unequal material conditions.[134] As Marios Constantinou rightly observes, whereas Hegel in a sense legitimated the master's oppression by thinking it to be the key to transforming the

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[131] Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 84-85.

[132] *Ibid., 83.*

[133] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 216-222.

[134] Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil,* 26. We see that Badiou and Fanon both follow the existential tradition on this point—despite Badiou's ontological method—when Fanon writes forcefully that "there is nothing ontological about segregation" (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 163).

bondsman into the real "mover of history," Badiou rejects the legitimacy of the master's oppression on its face by conceiving the political act as the refusal to recognize such an ontologically unjustifiable relation by asserting the reality of our ontological sameness.[135] Applying this to the example provided by Fanon, it is in thinking "beyond" the unjustifiable relation between blackness and whiteness that we can avoid reinscribing its principle in a different form.

In addition, our ontological sameness is universally accessible to thought, further denigrating the charges of authoritarianism and utopianism. Whereas the assertion of partiality is the hallmark of authoritarianism, asserting that every human being is equally related to the situation in terms of their *being* means that every human being has the same potential to access anything related to that situation, regardless of how the situation happens to recognize or misrecognize her. And since all human beings are thinking beings, they *all* have the capacity to imaginatively distance themselves from the situation so as to assert the reality of sameness that is always already related to the differentiating encyclopedia. This means that though pure and infinite equality is infinitely 'beyond' particularity, the provision itself to assert the truth of its (in)existence is anything but a utopian one. Thus we see why, in Ed Pluth's words, Badiou grants the recognition of what happens to differentiate individuals a "mundane ontological quality" in his account

[135] Marios Constantinou, "*Contra Opinionem:* Politics as Anti-Imperialist Procedure" in *Badiou and the Political Condition* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 114.

of the possibility of more just relations between what are truly ontologically equal beings.[136]

Further, the differences catalogued in the encyclopedia are always reducible to the particular ways in which the state has coerced us to be *interested* in the material conditions of our situation. As we saw in the previous chapter, the state asserts one-sided and partial values, and one-sided and partial beings take up those values as if they were genuinely their own. Asserting the existence of equality, on the other hand, disrupts this contingent and unequal state of affairs by "taking no account of particular interests"—neither those of the master nor those of the slave.[137] Badiou therefore agrees with Fanon that just political action begins from a faithful perspective that is entirely *disinterested* in the values posited by the state. As he writes, "justice, which is the theoretical name for an axiom of equality, necessarily refers to an entirely *disinterested subjectivity.*"[138]

However, Badiou adds an existential justification for the claim that just political action runs counter to all interests, which is that whereas interestedness is not distinct to human life, the ability to think beyond all particularities is a distinctly human capacity.[139] Here, Badiou goes further than Fanon in his ability to prevent his thinking of

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[136] Pluth, 169. Wendy Brown makes the same point in her analysis of 'rights' discourse, in which she argues that assigning particular rights to particular recognized groups constrains the possibility of recognizing changes in the constitutions of those groups and their constituent individuals. For this analysis, see "Suffering Rights as Paradoxes" in *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory* (2000).

[137] Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 97.

[138] Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 73.

[139] *Ibid.*, 71.

revolutionary action from inscribing a similarly unjust state of affairs as the one it seeks to replace. First, the "truth" of oppression is equally accessible to all thinking beings, regardless of whether they themselves are on the "wrong side" of the state's imposed system of values. Second, since Badiou's truth is wholly beyond the situation, it does not risk merely destroying one unjust value system so as to replace it with an opposite but equally oppressive one. As Constantinou writes, this total circumvention of the coercive state avoids "generating an exchange network of stratified corruption."[140] Badiou is therefore justified in his assertion that political action faithful to the existence of truths is "the very opposite of submission," as it involves the "subtraction" of the individual actor from her coercion by the state to value certain things over others.[141]

The state is interested in recognizing differences in order to keep its differential order in place, and since the state will not accept the existence of truths without elements within existence *forcing* it to do so, that state is inherently conservative. Genuinely transcendent political action, according to Badiou, is that which frees itself from this statist norm of "recognizing differences" by asserting the existence of equality at the outset.[142] This means that in terms of the content of justified political action, Badiou follows Fanon: just as the particulars of Fanon's revolutionary violence were justified in

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[140] Constantinou, 114.

[141] *Ibid.,* 510.

[142] This is strikingly similar to what we see in the thought of Badiou's contemporary, Jacques Rancière. Both figures argue that genuine political action presumes the reality of equality from the start of its interruption of the state's pre-established configuration. For Rancière's non-ontological version of the argument for this strategy for political action, see *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minnesota University Press: 1999).

advance by their targeting the "truth" of their situation—in his case, the injustice of the colonial situation itself—faithful political action may appear differently because it appears according to the particularities of its situation, but all action is justified in advance insofar as it targets the "truth" of the (in)existence of equality.[143]

Importantly, both of these accounts exclude *terroristic* violence from the status of just political action. In Fanon's case, the killing of individuals misrecognizes their existential character as free, perpetuating the same injustice it purports to violently uproot. In a similar way, the faithful act associated with Badiou's assertion of the existence of human equality cannot coherently entail the destruction of some individuals and not of others, since any justification for this destruction would inevitably refer to some individual's partial and one-sided interests. Here, we see an additional importance for the role of materiality in the enactment of political life: as Pluth points out, differences by this account can be "purifying," as they cause existences to assert themselves and reveal the state to be coercive.[144] In any case, to act outside statist norms in any way is to enact an *illegal violence* to the hegemony of the encyclopedia. This confirms the insight that violence ought to be conceived more broadly than as pure destruction.

Thus we see that "true" political action for Badiou is never merely blanket contrarianism, nor the wholesale destruction of the terms of the situation. Rather, it is a

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[143] Badiou, *Logics of Worlds,* 521.
[144] Pluth, 168.

creative violence that, in supplementing the situation, *forces* the state of affairs to admit to its coercion of objectivity and allow for the recognition of the infinity of existences, which has in fact always already existed. In particular, in the domain of political life, this infinite existence is the reality of human equality. This reality is revealed in the process of forcing, as the individual demonstrates her capacity, shared with all other human beings, to discern it from beneath the material differences that the state, in its one-sidedness and partiality, uses to cover it over. Though this process may involve the destruction of the arms of the encyclopedia that enforce the state's arbitrary ordering of being—such as the party, the institution of marriage, the art museum, or the scientific association—this destruction itself is incidental to the truth that justifies it. With this affirmation of the both the destructive *and* the creative aspects of violence, we now see that Badiou ontology allows for a robust notion of freedom that is entirely compatible with, and in fact pushes forward, Fanon's "new humanist" advocacy of revolutionary violence.

Concluding Remarks

We now see how Badiou's Platonic understanding of the "truth" towards which revolutionary action aims provides a powerful framework for thinking the real and observable difficulties involved in the phenomenon of revolution. While allowing for a sort of "continual revolution" that is never satisfied with the unequal political circumstances we always already experience, this placement also brings about a more

robust conception of the notion of transcendence, as it excludes appealing to the unjust state to recognize what it, in its self-referential partiality, would prefer to exclude. Most importantly, however, Badiou's theorizing of the event fills in the gap in Fanon's thought with regards to how consciousness translates its experience of the arbitrariness of the situation into thought of moving "beyond" the unjust circumstances imposed by the conditions of our political co-existence. In short, it is only when the situation is put at a distance that it can be seen as one-sided, contingent, and therefore arbitrary in the way Fanon described.

This placement of the novel "truth" of political life beyond any present situation also leads to the further conclusion, against Fanon, that genuinely revolutionary action is never guaranteed in advance by the any condition inherent to situatedness—no matter how unjust the conditions of situatedness may be. In other words, the coming-to-be of a novel state of affairs is never a determinism for the way we construct our social and political worlds, adding another layer of moral importance to the revolutionary decision. But since the assertion of the existence of equality guards against both authoritarianism and utopianism, if the individual "takes up" the possibility of novelty revealed by the event in a way that genuinely asserts the existence of justice, it avoids reinscribing a similarly hierarchical and therefore unjust state of affairs. We thus see in Badiou's thought an affirmation of our capacity to think "beyond" the situation so as to bring into being novel and progressively humanistic conditions for political life, placing the

genuinely political act outside the bounds of what is already and often too easily considered to be political in nature.

Conclusion: Revolutionary Violence as the Essence of Political Life

> The development and internal progression of the actual struggle expand the number of directions in which culture can go and hint at new possibilities. The liberation struggle does not restore to national culture its former values and configurations. This struggle, which aims at a fundamental redistribution of relations between men, cannot leave intact either the form or substance of the people's culture. After the struggle is over, there is not only the demise of colonialism, but also the demise of the colonized.
>
> Frantz Fanon[145]

The "coming-to-be" of novelty is a possibility for human life, one that can be observe in the lived experience of striving towards ways of being in the world that are fundamentally different from—and possibly preferable to—those of the present. This reality is observable in the lived experience of the kind political revolution that does fundamental *violence* to our present way of being in the world. However, as I have argued, understanding this possibility requires understanding the character of the very *being* of the political life in which it occurs. We may never be *fully* convinced of the rightfulness of our subordination by the state's self-interested principle of selective domination, but our pre-theoretical disposition to experience the state as absolute can be explained by the fact that we are self-conscious beings capable of recognizing ourselves as capable of a kind of transcendence that is always already being limited by the very condition of our being situated. Affirming equality over and against a situation that seeks

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[145] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 245-246.

to obscure and undermine it, then, is the most existence-affirming moment for the existing self-conscious individual.

Importantly, this makes the very *being* of political life consist in something other than merely thinking according to, and then choosing from, the options already made available by the situation. Instead, engaging our political being in the world, in its full sense, involves fundamentally overturning the system by which the situation's possibilities are limited, making it a *difficult* and *embattled* reality that is never guaranteed in advance by the very character of being situated. And this revolutionary overturning, of course, must involve material and existential violence against the unjust conditions of the present into which we are thrown.

However, the conditions of possibility for this lived experience are difficult to uncover precisely because we find ourselves situated in a context that always already limits our possibilities for thinking and being. As such, from a perspective limited to the experience of the individual, the impetus and possibilities for the project of revolution are hidden from view. This is why Fanon's purely phenomenological analysis does not include an ontology of the how these possibilities come to appear to the situated individual in the first place, as he points only to the experience of recognizing that we are being misrecognized by the political state of affairs. Badiou, on the other hand, goes further than description, using an ontological framework to account for the transformation of our experience of the state of affairs as absolute to that of being fundamentally limited in its one-sidedness. This ontology of the event explains how the

appearance of the situation's values as absolute can come to be recognized by any individual—whether they themselves are misrecognized and oppressed by the situation or not—to be a mere appearance, as the state of affairs is finally revealed to be the arbitrary and one-sided reality it has always already been. In short, Badiou's ontology, in beginning from the insights of the existential and phenomenological traditions, sheds important and essential light on the conditions of possibility for the lived experience of revolutionary projectivity, countering Fanon's claim that ontology is entirely incapable of accounting for the lived experience of oppression. Therefore, far from abandoning the phenomenological-existential method, Badiou's ontological "Platonism" offers a way of thinking the conditions of possibility for the actuality of revolutionary violence.

In addition, and ironically, while Fanon claims that revolution is necessary without grounding its possibility, Badiou explains its possibility so as to deny its necessity. This can be explained by their respective placements of the "truth" towards which revolutionary action aims. If we place the truth of political life within its lived experience, it can be thought to be a necessary consequence of the character of that lived experience. But what interrupts the endless repetition of an unjust state of affairs that leverages all available resources—including the human beings against whom it perpetrates its injustice—to ensure its perpetual hegemony? In contrast, if the truth aimed at in revolution lies "beyond" any and all claims to hegemony, the possibility that it will be reached from within finite and coerced conditions is not only uncertain, but is in fact, strictly speaking, impossible. Though this may at first seem to limit revolutionary politics

in advance, it in fact allows us to project ourselves towards a *perpetual revolution*, as the truth of our equality—towards which a just political life ought to strive—always remains outside the partial and one-sided situations we shape for ourselves.

However, they both agree that if political violence is to avoid producing an existentially violent situation similar in kind to the one it sought to overturn in the first place, the revolutionary act must not be directed at some predetermined, overarching "end." Our thinking about the specifics of "the good state" always and inevitably imports the particular interests of the one who thinks those specifics *from within the situation that is to be overcome*. This means that the act that aims towards one individual's thought of "the good" cannot simultaneously claim to aim towards producing a situation that reflects our essential equality. In addition, our interests always refer to the values and terms that the present situation has imposed upon us, preventing any new order that is founded upon them from coming-to-be in a way that fundamentally differs from the one-sided order already set up. In order to avoid having the revolutionary act result in such conservatism—and possibly authoritarianism—both Fanon and Badiou conceive the act *itself* in ways that prevent individual interests from taking a foundational role. That is, while both take the attempt to take a *disinterested* perspective on the coercive values of the present to be essential, Fanon's violence takes direct aim at the material arms of the situation's existential oppression, while Badiou's revolutionary politics denies the situation's violent demand for absolute recognition. In short, both of these conceptions of violence take aim at the "truth" of the political situation—one as immanent within it, the

other entirely "beyond" it—by allowing the revelation of the situation's arbitrariness to direct its course.

Are these understandings of revolutionary violence equipped to prevent the violent act from becoming one of purely terroristic destruction? As I have argued, while both figures acknowledge the role of materiality in revolutionary activity, they also think it to be incidental to the way in which revolutionary violence is justified *in advance* by the very character of the situations out of which it springs. Our human-historical situations have always accommodated our universal capacity for transcendence in ways that contradict that universality. As such, the very act of destroying aspects of situations involves the *production* of novel situations, forcing our worlds to reflect our equality more adequately: first, insofar as the individual now enacts her capacity for transcendence, and second, insofar as the situation is forced to recognize and then accommodate the reality of that capacity. Thus, it is in taking these two figures together that the meaning of Badiou's assertion of the existence of equality can be understood.

While it may be objected that thinking the idea of equality in terms of transcendence is to give it specific content, I hope to have shown that our capacity for transcendence, in its generality, is what Badiou has in mind when he thinks our ontological equality. The kind of specifics that must be prevented from contaminating revolutionary action are those that refer to the arbitrary features of the situation at hand—such as, for example, the particular understandings of "blackness" and "whiteness" that may operate at the particular time and place of colonial rule. In contrast to such a

particular aspect of a particular encyclopedia, our universal capacity for transcendence—while it may be oppressed—is trans-situational, meaning that it is *possible* for all human beings across all human circumstances. Given its universality and eternality, its universal and eternal accommodation is what we strive towards when we speak of political equality. And although the particular way to accommodate this transcendence is the dangerous question developing a political life that recognizes those individuals whose freedom was previously denied, forgotten, or subordinated, the ontological fact of our equality—and the possibility of our thinking and imagining this equality—is the condition of possibility for holding on to a hope without specific content. In short, our universal capacity for transcendence lies at the heart of the possibility of a "new humanist" revolutionary politics.

However, although this novel "new humanism" takes our capacity to think and imagine otherwise to be essential to the possibility of even *hoping* to overturn the injustice of a particular situation, it does not forget that real, material conditions are the most significant obstacle—as well as the most significant means—for the eventual enactment of revolutionary action. In fact, the strength of the influence of material reality on the individual's lived experience is precisely the impetus for pushing the notion of transcendence past the one that we inherit from the existential tradition. That is, in leveraging materiality in order to act as if it were *already* the case that our freedom is recognized by the situation, we *force* the material world to adjust to its reality—a reality it in fact already relied upon for its very constitution. And considering the situation's

commitment to endlessly repeating its own terms, this act is a *difficult* and absolutely *unnecessary* decision to shape the world otherwise, giving it a specifically human and moral quality.

These conclusions about just political action have broad and important implications for our understanding the very being of justice in general. Specifically, as I hope to have shown, it unmoors us from our presuppositions about the nature of justice that the Western tradition inherited from Plato. If we understand the violent interruption of the status quo to be *the* genuine political moment, we can no longer hold that the just situation is that which is in complete and utter harmony with itself. But on the other hand, violence still involves striving towards harmony, as it aims to produce a situation that is progressively harmonious with the individual's character as equal to all others in terms of her capacity for freedom. And since our situations, in their particularity, are never able to recognize and accommodate this rigorously universal equality, our striving to produce a situation that is harmonious with our existential characters is always violent to our unjust situations. In understanding our existential characters as capable of transcending the injustice of inequality alongside an egalitarian Platonist ontology, however, we see that the kind of political life that is harmonious with the essence of justice involves perpetually transcending our unequal situations to produce novel and progressively equal ones—the specific content of which are necessarily unforeseeable.

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