

“AN ETHICS OF VIOLENCE JUSTIFYING ITSELF.” SARTRE’S EXPLORATIONS OF VIOLENCE AND OPPRESSION

In his *Notebooks for an Ethics*, Sartre describes what he calls both an “ethics of force” and “an ethics of violence justifying itself.”¹ Its presentation consists of fourteen principles. Here are four of them: the victor is always right; acts of goodness are signs of weakness; one has no right to resist force unless one is strong enough to hold it back; and the violence has always already begun. The examples Sartre uses in this context- rape, lynching, the auto-da-fé - make clear that he lists these principles in an attempt not to support, but rather to expose justifications of violence. But elsewhere in the same book Sartre tries to show the revolutionary possibilities of violence and in so doing finds himself drawing on the same principles. The present essay takes this ethics of violence from *Notebooks for an Ethics* as the starting-point for a reexamination of Sartre’s notorious exaltation of violence in the 1960s. Sartre’s discussions of violence in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and the Preface to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* are often cited, but he defends the use of violence in a number of other places as well. For example, in a newspaper interview from 1962, Sartre declares “In my view the essential problem is to reject the theory according to which the Left owes it to itself not to respond to violence with violence.”² Sartre does not say this in a vacuum but less than a month after his apartment had been bombed for the second

¹Jean-Paul Sartre, *Cahiers pour une morale*. (Paris: Gaillimard, 1983), p. 194; trans. David Pellauer, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 186. Henceforth *CM* and *NE* respectively.

²Jean-Paul Sartre, “Repondre à la violence par la violence?” *France-Observateur*, February 1, 1962. Quoted by Michael Contat and Michel Rybalka, *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre*, vol. one, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 415.

time. In 1968, in the context of the student revolution, Sartre presents violence as the only thing left to the students: "In our used-up Western countries, the only power to challenge on the Left is made up of students and soon, I hope, of all the young. This power to challenge is violent because people are doing violence to it."³ Finally, in "The Maoists in France" Sartre does not disassociate himself from the idea he attributes to the Maoists that "everywhere that revolutionary violence is born among the masses, it is immediately and profoundly moral."⁴ in isolation these comments are shocking and are intended to be, but it is the thesis of this essay that it is not enough that they are seen in the context of their time. They cannot be assessed unless they are also read in the broader context of Sartre's reflections on violence, particularly in that most exploratory of books, *Notebooks on Ethics*.⁵

Violence is not an important concept in *Being and Nothingness*, but insofar as Sartre makes conflict the original meaning of being-for-others, the scene is already set for a philosophy that offers little or no escape from violence, at least as broadly conceived.⁶ In *Being and Nothingness* the focus of this conflict is over who is to hold the power of the gaze. The one who holds the Other in his or her gaze controls and gives identity to the one who is looked at. It is with reference to this context that one must understand Sartre's attempt in *Notebooks for an Ethics* to define violence as "a refusal of being looked at," in other words, as the refusal to be anything

³Jean-Paul Sartre, Interview on Radio Luxembourg, May 12, 1968. Quoted by Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre*, vol. one, p. 525.

⁴Jean-Paul Sartre, "Les maos en France," *Situations, X*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1976), p. 45; trans. Paul Auster and Lydia Davis, *Sartre in the Seventies*. (London: André Deutsch, 1978), p. 169.

⁵*Notebooks on Ethics* is an exploratory text. Everything said there is only provisional. To the extent that Sartre did subject this text to further scrutiny, it was to judge it unsuitable for publication, at least at that time. But that merely means that whatever we read there must be approached with caution and read as more tentative than it appears to be.

⁶Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 431; trans. Hazel Barnes, *Being and Nothingness*. (London: Methuen, 1957), p. 364. Henceforth *EN* and *BN* respectively

other than a pure transcendence (CM 184; NE 176). Similarly, with reference to what he calls "the pacified image of violence," Sartre emphasizes that violence is in the first instance a look, such as the look which transforms the slave into a thing, albeit it is further defined by languages (CM 277; NE 266-267). But although Sartre acknowledges a corporeal basis to violence in the bodies that have to oppose or confront each other (CM 300; NE 288), for the most part Sartre in these early works offers a narrower conception of violence than these passages suggest. *Notebooks for an Ethics* offers a threefold distinction between alienation, oppression, and violence. If in the period immediately following the Second World War, Sartre is not led by his conflictual account of interpersonal relations to proclaim the ubiquity or virtual ubiquity of violence, it is because the idea of oppression intervenes. So, for example, instead of investigating the historical basis of violence, Sartre explores the historical basis of oppression.

Sartre has a lengthy discussion in *Notebooks for an Ethics* of the existential-ontological conditions of oppression (CM 353-354; NE 325-398). In the course of it he challenges the claim that oppression is economically determined (CM 353-354; NE 340). He does so by revisiting Engels' debate with Dühring on the question of whether violence or economics was the more primitive phenomenon. Dühring, on Sartre's account, upholds the position that one should take as one's starting-point the intersubjective relation independent of any prior situation (CM 354; NE 341). Even though this is a tendency to which phenomenology is prone and one to which *Being and Nothingness* could - at least on a certain static reading - be said to have succumbed, Sartre accepts from Engels the need for a dialectical account that recognizes historical reality. This leads Sartre to advocate a synthesis of Dühring and Engels. With Engels one must say that oppression is not a gratuitous decision in the sense that it can only arise at a certain moment of technical and economic development. With Dühring one must say that oppression is a human fact in the sense that one must take account of the human price that has to be paid, whatever the economic advantage (CM 361-362; NE 347-348).

Even though Sartre might have been expected to develop his thesis concerning the conflictual character of relations in *Being and Nothingness* into a philosophy in which violence saturated all relations, in *Notebooks for an Ethics* he avoids this consequence. It is not violence that is ubiquitous but alienation, "the predominance of the Other in the pair Other and the same" (CM 429; NE 413). Nevertheless, the structure of alienation in Sartre is not as simple as this formula might suggest. Already in *Notebooks for an Ethics* Sartre's understanding of alienation is informed by Lacan's early article on "Family Complexes in the Formation of the Individual."⁷ It is on the basis of "the Other in me," the way the Other inhabits me and makes me other, that the climate of oppression is spread: "from the very first moment, I oppress because I am oppressed, I transmit oppression" (CM 381; NE 367). As for the distinction between oppression and violence, Sartre states it most clearly in "Revolutionary Violence," a text that is included in *Notebooks for an Ethics* as an appendix.

Violence . . . cannot be defined apart from some relation to the laws that it violates (human or natural laws). It represents a suspending of these laws, a "vacation from legality." Oppression, on the contrary, can be institutional. It suffices that oppressing class legitimate its oppression by law and that the oppressed class, out of weakness, complicity, ignorance, or any other reason, obeys these laws and implicitly or explicitly recognizes them through its behavior. (CM 579; NE 561).

Sartre applies this distinction to the condition of slaveholders who, like their slaves, were born into the institution and who thus considered slaveowning to be both natural and legitimate (CM 579; NE 561). Hence, Sartre's judgment that the slaveowner was in good conscience, whether or not he was in bad faith (CM 580; NE 562). Similar conditions pertain today:

⁷Jacques Lacan, *Les complexes familiaux dans la formation de l'individu*, (Paris: Navarin, 1984). See CM 380; NE 366-367.

a young bourgeois is an oppressor although he or she does not exercise any violence on the worker (*CM* 361; *NE* 347).

Although Sartre initially defines violence in terms of the laws it breaks, he does not stop there. Violence is not only an intervention or a demand to attain a certain goal. Whoever is violent also claims the right to be violent. (*CM* 181; *NE* 173). Violence demands that it be recognized as legitimate and justified (*CM* 185; *NE* 177). This is what is meant by "an ethics of violence justifying itself," and the principles of the ethics of force are the means by which it finds legitimization. So, for example, the victors write history and to that extent determine what was and what was not justified. Violence is always engaged in battle for recognition from its victims. This introduces the contradiction that is familiar from Hegel's master slave dialectic: violence attempts to render a free being inessential at the same time that it wants that being to recognize the violence as legitimate, which that being can only do only if it retains its essentiality (*CM* 185; *NE* 177). As Sartre observes, at the very moment a torturer succeeds in conquering his victim's spirit, the victim is reduced to being inessential with the consequence that his or her recognition has no value. Violence "needs the freedom it denies" (*CM* 186; *NE* 178). However, in *Notebooks for an Ethics* Sartre is not held captive by Hegel's account of the master-slave dialectic. In *Being and Nothingness* he already offers a provisional critique of Hegel as a basis for approaching the issue of our concrete relations with others (*EN* 290-300; *BN* 235-244). In *Notebooks for an Ethics* Sartre goes to some lengths to show that Hegel's analysis would not apply to Black slaves in the United States. It lacks an historical basis. The fact that Sartre dwells on this example reflects not only his growing obsession with racism, following his visit to the United States, but also a more general concern with the institutional forms of violence.⁸

⁸See Jean-Paul Sartre, "Retour des Etats-Unis. Ce que j'ai appris du problème noir," *Le Figaro*, June 16, 1945, p. 2; "Return from the United States: What I Learned about the Black Problem," trans. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Existence in Black*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon, (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 83-89. Also Robert Bernasconi, "Sartre's Gaze Returned: The Transformation of the Phenomenology of Racism," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1995, pp.201-221.

If Sartre places such emphasis on exposing violence where it has previously gone unacknowledged, it is because he knows that, short of absolute victory over one's enemies, this is where the battle over the justification of violence is fought. To disclose the violence that created and sustained certain social institutions is an essential part of legitimating the violence directed against those institutions. That is why throughout *Notebooks for an Ethics* Sartre insists on exposing the implicit forces of violence concealed under the rule of order. Sartre observes that where slavery is the given order, freedom appears as disorder (CM 579; NE 561), but it presents a problem for the attempt to justify the violence that the oppressed directs against the oppressor. Where past violence is considered past, the target becomes the oppressor's controlling gaze. The problem is well illustrated by Sartre's appeal to the example of the workers' revolts at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Sartre describes the destruction of tools as an attempt to combat the way certain objects anticipate me. Machines embody the gaze of their designer and the entrepreneurs who order them. Their gaze addresses the workers compelled to use them. Destruction of the tool is destruction of the gaze (CM 184; NE 176). Sartre shows how one freedom limits another within a system of complicity, between the oppressor and the oppressed, but this minimizes the violence underwriting the system.

However, a different story emerges when Sartre focuses on how violence puts the vanquished in the situation of having to accept it in the form of Right. Resistance, instead of establishing itself as counter-violence, is constituted as unlawfulness and the punishment handed out has already been accepted in advance (CM 275; NE 264-265). Sartre presents the obstacles placed in the way of African-Americans voting in the United States as an illustration of the hypocrisy of modern oppression. In this situation the oppressor treated the oppressed both as an abstract moral person by formally giving him or her a vote while at the same time establishing conditions, like heavy poll taxes, that serve as a form of concrete negative violence and effectively reduce the potential voter to an object (CM 150; NE 142). To change the situation, Sartre argues, the oppressed have to use violence. Sartre also

offers the example of a Jewish captain who is denied entry by the proprietor of an American hotel. Sartre sets out the kind of reasoning that, as he puts it, is "classic" in the United States and which made such acts of discrimination possible (*CM* 152; *NE* 143). The formal freedom of the proprietor appears to legitimize the violence done to the Jew on the material plane. But this is not "formal violence," such as the Jew would need to use in order to gain admission (*CM* 151; *NE* 143). Sartre explains it as being like a child who hits a friend and then immediately sues for peace, saying "I give up", before there is a chance for retaliation. The rights of those who deny Blacks the vote or who segregate restaurants and hotels are protected by the fact that any violence that might change these conditions is outlawed, even though these conditions were themselves established by violence in an earlier time (*CM* 150; *NE* 142). Hence, Sartre writes that the Evil in violence comes not from the fact that violence destroys right, but because violence creates it, so that the vanquished has to accept right or die (*CM* 275; *NE* 264). Sartre could not have been more emphatic in asserting a connection between violence and right: "All violence presents itself as the recuperation of a right and, reciprocally, every right inexorably contains within itself the embryo of violence" (*CM* 185; *NE* 177).

It is, therefore, not only the children and grandchildren of slaveowners who take slavery for granted. According to Sartre, there are slaves who accept the institution of slavery as natural. Such a slave who is forced by hunger to steal meat from the master's table is still operating within the system. To steal the meat is to acknowledge that the master owns it (*CM* 405; *NE* 391). The difficulty of thinking beyond the established order seems to suggest to Sartre that one can break with the order only through destroying the Other (*CM* 414; *NE* 400) and that such destruction of the Other can occur *only* through violence (*CM* 419; *NE* 404). Sartre describes how slaves revolt as much by burning down a barn as by killing the master. In both cases they reject the master's power and break through any complicity in the system that results from their obedience (*NE* 412; *CM* 398). A violent person may not have any explanation of why they did what they did, any more than the hero or heroine who saves a drowning child has (*CM*

413; *NE* 399). Lacking the power to have his or her own project and thus of the human itself (*CM* 416; *NE* 403).

From this perspective violence appears as a progress toward freedom (*CM* 419; *NE* 405). Addressing the question that subsequent commentators will continually raise against Sartre's account of violence, he writes the following:

Is it an absolute Evil, as pacifists and Christians would have it, a necessary Evil as Camus says, or a good as Sorel suggests? The answer is clear. Violence is an absolute Evil from the point of view of the Other in me. And it is just from this point of view, by the way, that it gets constituted as violence. (*CM* 419; *NE* 405).

Sartre even argues that "true human ethics" is born in the isolated negative violence of the slave who burns the barn or the big house or who kills the master and is immediately put to death (*CM* 412; *NE* 398). The remark seems aimed at Hegel, or at least, at some of his commentators, such as Kojève, who saw in the slave's submission a beginning. Sartre does not say the slave's death is a beginning of history, but of ethics, and this because he fears that the dialectic of master and slave can be employed to justify oppression (*CM* 66; *NE* 60). This indeed is what Engels seemed to be doing when he insisted on slavery as a form of progress, while neglecting the human fact of oppression (*CM* 355; *NE* 342-348).

In a contemporary essay, "Materialism and Revolution," Sartre claims that the true revolutionaries do not demand rights for themselves. They set out to destroy the idea of rights which they understand as a hoax of the privileged class.⁹ To claim one's rights as an individual is not to be a revolutionary, but to seek to join the privileged class. One cannot claim these rights for one's whole class. This is because the rights derive from the oppression the revolutionary wants to destroy. One cannot destroy the oppression without destroying the rights (*S*

⁹Jean-Paul Sartre, "Materialisme et révolution," *Situations. III*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 186; trans. Annette Michelson, *Literary and Philosophical Essays*. (New York: Criterion, 1955), p. 215. Henceforth *S III* and *LPE*.

III 187; LPE 216). Whereas oppressive violence operates within a Manichean conception of the world in which one only needs to remove the obstacles - the Jews, Blacks, homosexuals, heretics - to deliver the Good (NE 182; CM 174), the revolutionary keeps to a minimum the violence against the oppressor as human, but because the revolutionary will need their expertise: "Thus in spite of everything, the bloodiest of revolutions involves coalition" (S III 189; LPE 217). But the decisive coalition is that among the oppressed and, according to Sartre, it is established by violence: "The union of the oppressed will come about . . . through violence and it will *always* contradict the existing right" (CM 150; NE 142).

Even though Sartre seems to see a positive side to violence, he concedes that terrorist violence might prove a dead end, "an experience that can benefit no one" (CM 420; NE 406). It is less a solution than a structure of servitude, like the slave's resignation. Sartre concludes: "It just serves as a typical example of this moral law: in the case of *impossibility*, the choice of the Good leads to reinforcing the impossible, what we have to choose is Evil in order to discover the Good" (CM 420; NE 406). One should not mistake Sartre's rejection of the maxim of violence that "the end justifies the means" for a rejection of violence. Sartre argues that insofar as one pursues a concrete and finite goal which is not violence itself, then the use of violence to attain the goal appears "unjustified and *limited*" (CM 216; NE 207).¹⁰ But Sartre proceeds to explain that there is a contradiction that is immanent to ethics and that justifies violence. The problem is that however much I want a world in which human beings are treated as ends, the situation excludes that. For the factory owner who must treat the working class as means, the end is sacrificed. Nevertheless, Sartre does allow a solution to the antinomy. It is found not in

¹⁰Linda Bell uses this text to emphasize Sartre's rejection of the maxim of violence, even though she acknowledges that he may have found revolutionary violence may be "necessary" even justified in a limited sense. See "Violence, oppression, and regulative ideas," *Man and World*, 29, 1996, p. 76. A more balanced, but in my view still incomplete presentation of Sartre's views of violence, can be found in her *Rethinking Ethics in the Midst of Violence*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993), esp. 183-190.

distinguishing means and ends more rigorously, but by recognizing the other as both end and means. This happens when one helps the other to choose to be a means toward the absolute end (*CM* 216; *NE* 207). Sartre's thinking here is far from clear but it confirms that even though Sartre finds no immediate escape from violence, he does not exclude the possibility of some release from it. Early in *Notebooks for an Ethics* Sartre insists that the rejection of war does not suppress war. But a few lines later we read: "Communication does not exist - it must be brought about . . . Just as in a universe of violence you cannot conceive of pure love. Unless that love contains the will to end the universe of violence" (*CM* 16; *NE* 9). Sartre does not exclude the possibility of radical transformation. Indeed that is precisely what ethics must be for him. "Morality . . . must be the choice of a world, not of a self" (*CM* 11; *NE* 3).

In spite of the great continuity between the analyses of violence in *Notebooks for an Ethics* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason* there is a decisive difference. The distinction between violence and oppression that in *Notebooks for an Ethics* enables Sartre to diffuse the potential violence of his ontology of oppression does not have the same structural role in *Critique of a Dialectical Reason*. Sartre's focus in this latter text is on violence in much the same way as it is on oppression in *Notebooks for an Ethics*. In *Critique of Dialectical Reason* Sartre revisits Engels' critique of Dühring that had already preoccupied him in *Notebooks for an Ethics*. Not only is Dühring still criticized for maintaining an essentialist view of "man." Sartre now portrays him less sympathetically than before: he is described as a fool (*CRD* 221; *CDR* 148). Nevertheless, Dühring is credited with recognizing the role of the negative in history, even if he misleadingly chose to call it "violence."¹¹ Sartre no longer feels the need to offer an interpretation of "pre-history" or "primitive society" as he had done in *Notebooks for an Ethics*. But there are more important differences. Whereas Sartre writes in *Notebooks for an Ethics*

¹¹Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 221; trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, (London: NLB, 1976), p. 148. Henceforth *CRD* and *CDR* respectively.

that “oppression is only allowed as a concept if there is an *act* of oppression” (CM 354; NE 341), in *Critique of a Dialectical Reason* the emphasis moves away from the act to its conditions: violence is not necessarily an action and as an action it is often absent, but as interiorized scarcity it is “the constant non-humanity of human conduct” (CRD 221; CDR 148-149). By making scarcity the material condition of concrete antagonism (CRD 192; CDR 113), Sartre resolves the question left unanswered in *Notebooks for an Ethics* of the source or meaning of the negative in history. That is to say, by equating the economy of scarcity with violence Sartre provides in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* a synthesis of Dühring and Engels that had more explanatory value than that given in *Notebooks for an Ethics*. Sartre now gives a historical account open to a dialectical development of how one person comes to see another as the Other and as the principle of Evil (CRD 221; CDR 149). Consistent with the “ethics of violence justifying itself,” this account provides a concrete basis for saying that the Other is the one who started the violence. What in *Being and Nothingness* was the conflict inherent in the gaze becomes in *Critique of a Dialectical Reason* a focus on “conflicts of scarcity, from nomad wars to strikes” (CDR 209; CDR 134).

A number of the same principles of the ethics of force that are set out in *Notebooks for an Ethics* are also rehearsed in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Sartre claims that the first movement of ethics is the constitution of evil and Manichaeism (CRD 208; CDR 132). This leads to the imperative “evil must be destroyed” (CRD 209; CDR 133). Violence is the means of its destruction and it presents itself as retaliation against the violence of the Other: “violence always presents itself as *counter-violence*” (CRD 209; 133). Furthermore, even though in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* Sartre introduces a distinction between two forms of violence - the free praxis that is directed against the freedom of the Other and fraternity-terror - they both share the same basic character that violence had in *Notebooks for an Ethics*: violence displays a reciprocal recognition of freedom and a negation, either reciprocal or univocal, of this freedom through the mediation of inorganic matter (CRD 689; CDR 736).

Racism and colonialism are the concrete problems to which Sartre applies the formal structures set out in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. One of the book's aims is to show the need to appeal to history in such cases instead of resorting to an economic or sociological interpretation (CRD 687 CDR 733). Otherwise said, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* establishes the importance of free praxis over all determinisms, such as Engels economism. Sartre examines the development of French colonialism in Algeria to show how it sustains itself. "The racism which occurs to an Algerian colonialist was imposed and produced by the conquest of Algeria, and is constantly recreated and reactualized by every day practice through serial alterity" (CRD 672; CDR 714). On the one hand, racism is produced objectively by the colonial system. The low wages paid reduce the colonized to the level of sub-humanity, which is how they are then seen by the colonialist (CRD 671; CDR 714). On the other hand, the elementary structures refer to various activities that produced them. Sartre understands this racism in terms of the ethics of force: "it is *in itself* self-justifying violence: violence presenting itself as induced violence, counter-violence and legitimate defense" (CRD 677; CDR 720). This means that, irrespective of what the colonized does or does not do, the colonialists' violence arises from their image of the colonized as other-than-man (CRD 676; CDR 720). It enables the colonizer to project the problem as calling for a social solution and not a political solution (CRD 677; CDR 721).

Sartre's analysis shows how the colonial situation was infused with violence. However complex the process leading to the conquest of Algeria- and Sartre insists that the French did not know how to make use of its conquest (CRD 672; CDR 715 and 722) - it instituted an original situation of violence as the fundamental relation of the colonialists to the colonized (CRD 672; CDR 714). This was the expression of a still abstract racism which constituted the enemy as inferior. But the transformation of Muslim society brought about as a result of the conquest was a real expression of violence. A structured society was turned into an atomized crowd, the members of which were produced as serial Others through this violence (CRD 673; CDR 715). *Critique of Dialectical Reason*

refers to the people born into this system the colonizers and colonized, as the “the children of the objective violence” (CRD 675; CDR 718). Without underwriting determinism, Sartre insists that one cannot escape from the consequences of the violence of one’s forebears (CRD 675-676; CDR 719). Sartre was not thereby justifying violence against the oppressor simply on the basis of the fact that the oppressor had started it. Rather he was exposing the fiction that the revolt initiates the violence.

The point of Sartre’ focus on history is not only to show free *praxis* in history, but also the effects of that *praxis*. Past oppressive *praxis* produced the situation (CRD 679; CDR 723). For example, Sartre shows that the form taken by Algerian society in the wake of colonialism was by no means necessary, as economic determinism would maintain. To restore agency to history. Sartre appeals to the distinction between *praxis* and process that he had introduced earlier in the book. If the colonial system is infused with violence, “it is man who inscribed his violence in things as the eternal unity of this passive mediation between men” (CRD 675; CDR 718). If French bourgeois society pauperizes the feudal Arab community it encounters, this is not because of the former’s economic superiority, but because of “the revolting brutality which so clearly characterized capitalism in its origins” (CRD 675; CDR 719). What looks like the inert result of a strict determinism is in fact produced by the petrified violence constituted by the presence of the colonial army (CRD 679; CDR 723). Or, more precisely, the inertia-violence of the institution absorbs the old violence in the objective certainty of violence as it is represented by the army. Nevertheless, the colonized experience this violence not simply as alienation but as “unforgivable violence,” the deliberate constraint imposed on them from outside (CRD 679; CDR 724). Sartre concludes, “if violence *becomes a praxis* of oppression, this is because it always was one” (CDR 686; CDR 732).

Nevertheless, this does not undermine Sartre’s sense of the complicity between the oppressor and the oppressed, which he had illustrated in *Notebooks for an Ethics* by appealing to the slaves’ resignation, their acceptance of slavery as a human fact (CM 406 and 481; NE 392 and 464). Sartre’s analysis of the

colonial system of violence leads in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* to an insight into the reciprocity of the colonialists and the colonized (CRD 676; CDR 720). They are a couple, “produced by an antagonistic situation and by one another” (CRD 677; CDR 721).

The struggle between the oppressed and oppressors ultimately became the reciprocal interiorization of a single oppression: the prime object of oppression, interiorizing it and finding it to be the negative source of its unity, appalled the oppressor, who recognized in *violent rebellion*, his own oppressive violence as hostile force taking him in turn as its object. And against his own violence *as Other*, he created a counter-violence which was simply his own oppression become *repressive*, that is to say, reactualized and trying to transcend the violence of the Other, in other words his own violence in the Other. (CRD 687; CDR 733).

The struggle between oppressor and oppressed becomes a rigid process of exploitation through the structure of alienation. This enables Sartre to take the responsibility for justifying their violence from the oppressed and put it squarely on the shoulders of the oppressor: “The violence of the rebel *was* the violence of the colonialist; there was never any other” (CRD 487; CDR 733). Unless one recognizes that what is at issue is an ethics of violence justifying itself one might readily mistake this for a determinism of the kind that Sartre sought to avoid or, equally as bad, a reduction of the rebel to a tool of the oppressor, even in his or her revolt.

I have noted the role of alienation in Sartre’s analysis of the history of slavery in *Notebook for an Ethics* and his analysis of colonial violence in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* because, when critics of Sartre focus on his later pronouncements about violence in such texts as his Preface to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, they tend to dwell on Sartre’s support for the violence of the colonized. This is to overlook the fact that Sartre’s argument is dominated by colonial violence, the

violence that seeks to dehumanize the colonized by destroying their culture, their traditions and their language.¹² Sartre says it clearly enough in describing how the colonized are drawn into violence: “first, the only violence is the settler’s; but soon they will make it their own” (DT 47; WE 17). And again: “at first it is not *their* violence, it is ours” (DT 48; WE 18). What Sartre learns from Fanon is a new way of describing the alienation at the heart of violence. Violence becomes a necessity for the colonized: “their mad impulse to murder in the expression of the native’s collective unconscious” (DT 48; WE 18). If they fail to express their violence, it devastates them: “to free themselves they even massacre each other” (DT 48; WE 18). Sartre insists that this irrepressible violence is a form of healing. Violence alone can heal the wounds inflicted by violence (DT 60; WE 30). Fanon calls it “cleansing violence” (*la violence désintoxique*) (DT 127; WE 94). Sartre’s contribution is to emphasize the role of the European in this process. Sartre insists that every European is as good as an accomplice in the crime of colonialism to the extent that he or she is diverted from the problem and fails to address it (DT 54; WE 24): “passivity serves only to place you in the ranks of the oppressors” (DT 55; WE 25). The exorbitant rhetoric in which Sartre announces the beginning of a new order sounds flat today. It detracts from the fact that few other texts have so powerfully called colonialists and new-colonialists to their responsibilities. But it is not “a philosophy of violence in and for itself,” which is what Raymond Aron calls it.¹³

I have not attempted to cover every stand of Sartre’s reflections on violence, nor subjected these reflections to a full

¹²Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface in Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 45; trans. (Constance Farmington, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Weidenfield, 1991), p. 15. Henceforth DT and WE respectively. For an example of one of Sartre’s critics who ignores past violence to focus only on new violence and who thus fails to address his argument, see Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970), pp. 89-91. Of course, Arendt did not have access to *Notebooks for an Ethics*.

¹³Raymond Aron, *Histoire et dialectique de la violence*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 218; trans. Barry Cooper, *History and the Dialectic of Violence*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), p. 192.

critique. Sartre's later texts are not free of a certain glorification of violence that undermines his genuine insights into the place of violence in society. Foremost among these insights is his recognition of the depth of the violence inherent in society, its reinscription as right, and the arguments used to justify it. Nevertheless, Sartre himself was well aware of their limitations. His ethics of violence did not always equip him to distinguish good violence from bad. For example, in an interview given in 1960, Sartre acknowledges that he was not, nor would he ever be, able to determine whether a specific act is an act of revolutionary violence or whether it goes beyond what could be justified in terms of the revolution.¹⁴ Furthermore, in conversation with Benny Lévy, Sartre denies that violence can produce fraternity as claimed in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, and he in general distances himself from the tone set in his Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*.¹⁵ I have chosen to emphasize the continuities in Sartre's reflections on violence, focusing on those strands of *Notebooks for an Ethics* that point toward and illuminate the later and more familiar accounts, but I do not want to leave the impression that Sartre maintained a single view across this period. Sartre's discussions of violence continued to exhibit the same sense of exploration as characterized *Notebooks for an Ethics*. That is why these discussions are better read as provocations to think further than as dogmas.

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¹⁴Jean-Paul Sartre, "Les écrivains en personne;," *Situations, IX*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 28.

¹⁵Jean-Paul Sartre and Benny Lévy, *L'espoir maintenant*, (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1991), pp. 61-66; trans. Adrian van den Hoven, *Hope Now*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 90-95.