

The Paradox of Spontaneity: Representation, Revolution and Violence in 20th Century Radical Theory

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Spontaneity has always held a certain allure for radical politics, particularly since it eludes thorny questions regarding the relationship between organizational leadership and mass participation. With significant advances in communications technology over the last few decades, the argument for spontaneity now has added force because of the instantaneous symbolic or spectacular reverberations of any mass action. One striking example is Jean Baudrillard's discussion of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The gravity of the attack, he claims, lies not in the number of casualties, but in its "symbolic impact" (*Spirit* 8). Above all, the attack "assimilated everything of modernity and globalism," only to turn this against the seeming pinnacle and protector of Western values, the United States. The media is a key player in the process, as a weapon of the "dominant power" made to serve its enemies by virtue of its efficient and global reach (19). Thus the "terrorists exploited the 'real time' of images," using their instantaneous transmission to give the event "unprecedented impact, but impact as image-event" (27). The result is a "highly symbolic weapon" where the "destructive potential is multiplied to infinity"—the reason Baudrillard dubs the attack the "absolute, irrevocable event" (21, 17).

To be sure, September 11 is a bad example in the sense that it was not spontaneous but highly planned, and it is not "revolutionary" by most standards. However, it aptly demonstrates how traditional forms of resistance appear to be outmoded in a capitalist system that is increasingly based on the production and global dissemination of immaterial goods like knowledge and information, which can be transmitted through borders with near impunity. In fact, there are noticeable parallels between Baudrillard's analysis and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's recent revolutionary manifesto, *Empire*. The thrust of Hardt and Negri's argument is precisely that Marxist categories need to be reformulated because the world has passed into an entirely new paradigm—a centre-less, global capitalist system they call "Empire." Therefore, Hardt and Negri claim to "write a new chapter of *Das Capital*," one "Marx could not write because the world that he analyzed did not allow him" ("Adventures" 237). In terms of radical resistance, the real innovation of *Empire* is that capitalist development faces the "multitude" of oppressed "without mediation": without the nation-state, "the situation of struggle is completely open" as "capital and labor are opposed in directly antagonistic form" (Hardt and Negri, *Empire* 237).

Since *Empire* is consistent through diverse contexts, Hardt and Negri contend that traditional "horizontal" forms of revolutionary organization are no longer a viable form of resistance (57). Pointing to numerous disconnected struggles—from the 1992 Los Angeles riots to the 1994 Chiapas uprising and massive strikes in Seoul and Paris—they claim that struggles have become "incommunicable," based on regional concerns that cannot be translated into the international context. Consequently, these struggles are "blocked" from "traveling horizontal in the form of a cycle," forced instead to "leap vertically and touch immediately on the global level"—that is, to directly attack the "virtual center of Empire" (54-5). Suggesting that a horizontal model of organization fails to grasp the "real potential presented by new struggles," Hardt and Negri even claim that the "incommunicability" of struggles is an advantage because, with the "vertical" augmentation of the media, "movements are immediately subversive in themselves" (58). The overwhelming implication

is that, as Baudrillard implies, the most effective resistance will replicate Empire, though here the “nonhierarchical and noncentered network structure” of the Internet is intended to preserve the localized *and mass* character of radical action through spontaneity (299).

Despite these indications of new possibilities for spontaneous action, traditional concerns about the ethical costs involved have not necessarily disappeared. Indeed, it is telling that two classic statements of spontaneity, those of Frantz Fanon and George Sorel, are extreme endorsements of revolutionary violence. In this regard, it seems like an opportune moment to reevaluate the place of spontaneity in radical politics, specifically in terms of its relationship with violence. My argument is that spontaneity has fundamentally paradoxical implications for radical politics: while it does help address the violence of representation *inside* a movement, it does so at the expense of any clear ethical criterion for the nature of violence permissible against those *outside* the movement. I will make this argument by drawing connections between more Marxian discussions of spontaneity, Fanon and Sorel in particular, and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s more ‘post-modern’ take on it. The first part will outline the appealing theoretical qualities of spontaneity by posing it in terms of a radical extension of Carl Schmitt’s “friend/enemy” antithesis. The second part will counter with some disturbing implications of a spontaneous unity that must be constructed in purely negative terms—against an enemy—using Hannah Arendt’s notions of “power” and “violence.” Finally, the article will close with a few insights on how the chaotic notion of spontaneity inspires a sense of strength to an otherwise weak and disorganized Left.

Escaping the Violence of Representation

In a passage that has been read by many as a confirmation of Vladimir Lenin’s ‘vanguardism,’ he remarks that spontaneous worker revolts or strikes could not be a sign of “Social-Democratic consciousness” among the workers because “it would have to be brought to them from without.” “The history of all countries,” he continues, “shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness,” while the theory of “scientific socialism” emerged from the “philosophic, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals” (“What is” 122). The idea of consciousness “from without” leads Lenin to support a rigid separation between the working class and the Party of the working class. Party membership should be restricted to ensure a “definite level” of consciousness within the Party, thereby saving it from “disorganization” and “vagueness” (“One Step” 306-9, 316-9).

Arguably Lenin’s elitist position was merely a tactical choice as a result of the autocratic conditions of Czarist Russia, but it nonetheless indicates a tension that is consistent throughout Marxist theory: on the one hand, the theory of Marxism proposes action on the basis of the historical laws and truths it discovers, though these have largely been the domain of intellectuals; on the other hand, a central idea of Marxism is proletarian “self-emancipation”—the masses are to be the agents of their own liberation.¹ The prevalence of solutions emphasizing the former have led many to abandon Marxism and other ‘essentialist’ theories on the grounds that a unidirectional leaders-led relationship cannot be avoided in these frameworks. Lenin’s formulation, for example, clearly departs from any concern with *representation* of the working class’ actual interests, promoting instead the *substitution* of the knowing leadership’s ‘objective’ determination of what these interests are for input from the working class. Spontaneity has frequently been used as a way to escape this dilemma because its contingent and impulsive character precludes *a priori* direction. Along these lines, Laclau and Mouffe argue that Rosa Luxemburg’s Marxist discussion of the “mass strike”—her moment of “spontaneism”—is misleading because it assumes an economic motivation to unity when the strike itself actually represents *the moment of “symbolic unity”* between a

plurality of “isolated” struggles, whose “specific literal demands” overflow their unification (Laclau and Mouffe 11, original emphasis).

The general idea of Laclau and Mouffe’s remark is captured in Gayatri Spivak’s distinction between the “two senses of representation”: the first is the ‘Leninist’ sense of “speaking for”; by contrast, the second sense involves mere “re-presentation,” a contingent and metaphorical summation of actual dynamics that she associates with “subject-predication.” Spivak’s basic point is that attempting to move beyond both “leads to an essentialist, utopian politics” because the transparency of the theorist is presumed; differentiation opens the possibility of “counterhegemonic ideological production” (Spivak 275-6). As Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan continues, without “re-presentation,” all “representations are inauthentic” since no “insider/outsider” distinction can be made. And, it is precisely this distinction that is required for any macro-political construction. Assuming that an intellectual agenda can, in some way, be “interrogated, transformed, and recontextualized by the agenda of the ‘masses’” allows outsiders the ability to “declare solidarity with a revolutionary politics” rather than merely attempting to direct the masses from outside (Radhakrishnan 75). The crucial point is that the process of constituting an “inside” is inherently concrete and contingent—it is the momentary but continuous fixation of a floating boundary. Therefore, spontaneity eludes the elitist violence of “speaking for” via its association with a concept of the “political” that is effectively an extension of the one outlined in 1932 by Carl Schmitt.

A pointed critique of the universalist aspirations of liberalism, Schmitt’s innovation is to present the political as a site of conflict and exclusion rather than one of consensus. In fact, he specifically aims to show that consensus only conceals the underlying power of a group to make decisions on the “enemy”: “In the concrete reality of the political, no abstract orders or norms but always real human groupings and associations rule over the other human groupings and associations” (Schmitt 72-3). In this regard, ethical principles cannot constitute a political entity by themselves. An abstract and universal concept such as “humanity” is only an “ideological instrument” since the “enemy does not cease to be a human being” and “humanity as such...has no enemy”(54). For Schmitt, the problem with liberalism is that it refuses the antithesis as fundamental to the “political” sphere as “good and evil” is to the moral sphere—the antithesis between “friend and enemy” (26). A politics of consensus is especially disturbing given that the “political” is, in his view, the “most intense and extreme antagonism” (29). By definition, any “concrete antagonism” approaching questions of war, the “existential negation of the enemy” or the “real possibility of physical killing” becomes increasingly political (33).

It is true that Schmitt’s militarized concept of the political is a circular and self-affirming criterion, and one that privileges states as the true “political entity” because they hold the right to declare war (*jus belli*). Slavoj Žižek rightly responds that Schmitt’s preoccupation with the war is an attempt to strike a decisive blow against liberal consensus through a “false radicalisation” of politics. Schmitt actually generates an “ultra-politics” based on a “war between ‘Us’ and ‘Them,’ our enemy, where there is no common ground for symbolic conflict.” The result is a strong conservative element to Schmitt’s concept of the political, as it privileges external relations between states and disavows a crucial concern for leftists, the “*internal* struggle which traverses the social body” (Žižek 29, original emphasis). Nevertheless, Schmitt’s basic point that a “political entity” is forged concretely against an “enemy” remains vital to ‘post-Marxists’ Laclau and Mouffe, although they amend the terrain of the political, as Žižek advises.

Indeed, the floating frontiers of the “friend-enemy” distinction do provide a compelling alternative to the un-democratic tendencies of traditional radical politics. Rather than premising politics on a belief in the *inherent* revolutionary character of one of an

individual's many identities or "subject-positions," Laclau and Mouffe follow Schmitt in asserting that unity is only articulated concretely and negatively. The "radical democratic hegemony" they advocate—their idea for the reconstitution of the socialist project—is constructed through a "chain of equivalences" among different identities based on the common identification of an antagonistic "outside"—an "enemy" (Laclau and Mouffe 143-4). In this process, difference, the unique positive character of an identity, is preserved because the "chain" can only be articulated in terms of a concrete threat. Subject-positions are never fully fixed or 'essentialized,' rendering a notion of society as "sutured and self-defined totality" inappropriate—instead, "society" is merely a "no-man's land" of perpetual articulation or a continuous "game" of hegemony (110-1, 193).

While Laclau and Mouffe's use of "hegemony" is an attempt to apply Schmitt's friend-enemy antithesis, it also shifts his conservative concept of the political into a "radical" one where the political is defined not by questions of war and the preservation of *life*, but rather by the preservation of *identity*. The crucial category signalling this shift is the category of "antagonism." As Beverly Best explains regarding Laclau's work, "establishing what a particular system of identities *is*, just as surely entails establishing that which it *is not*." In light of these "limits of a system," an "antagonistic force" is one that negates the identities stabilized to constitute that particular system. The antagonistic force is, in other words, "both a condition for, and a subversive threat" to all identities within the formation (Best 40-1, original emphasis). The impossibility of the final "suture" or "unity" is simply because this concept of the political presumes exclusion. Accordingly, after changing the aim from constructing a political "entity"—with Schmitt's territorial and legal undertones—to a "political *community*," Mouffe claims this process still requires a "we" that is "distinguished from the 'them,'" the "enemy." Consensus then misses the thrust of politics—the "context of diversity and conflict"—"since there will permanently be a 'constitutive outside,' an exterior to the community that makes its existence possible" ("Democratic Citizenship" 234-5, emphasis added).

Along a similar line, Mouffe explicitly draws on Schmitt to highlight the radical potential of what she calls the "paradox of liberal democracy." Liberal democracy, she explains, is torn between a "democratic logic of constituting the people" and a "tendency towards abstract universalism," exemplified by concepts such as "humanity." Despite Schmitt's "pessimistic verdict" on the matter, Mouffe insists the paradox has "very positive consequences." Although any articulation of the two contradictory logics is inherently "temporary, pragmatic, unstable and precarious," the articulation process makes it possible for radicals to coalesce around a "radical and democratic interpretation of the principles of liberty and equality," at least once they abandon the project of developing a "rational consensus" around the 'right' solution. ("Carl Schmitt" 43-4; "Democratic Citizenship" 236). In this regard, a term such as democracy is merely an "empty universal," and the task of radical politics is to struggle to impose the temporary meaning it constructs *against* the prevailing antagonistic and anti-democratic ones (Rüdiger 91). The aim, in other words, is to challenge all essentialist constructions—ones that "speak for" one identity at the expense of all other, unrecognised identities.

Of course, a key component of post-Marxism is precisely that struggles against oppressive economic relations are conceived as equal to all other struggles. Socialist demands based on a critique of economic inequality are, according to Laclau and Mouffe, a "moment internal to the democratic revolution, and only intelligible on the basis of the equivalential logic which the latter establishes" (Laclau and Mouffe 156). The spontaneity implied by this claim is located in the shift from a radical subject that is pre-determined to act in terms of an 'objective' class identity, as with orthodox Marxism, to one that is constituted on the floating and inherently concrete frontier politics of "friend" and "enemy." It should therefore be no

surprise that Marxists who are less committed to orthodox categories, due to anarcho-syndicalist leanings (Sorel) or a less-industrialized colonial context (Fanon), use spontaneity to escape the often-rigid boundaries of orthodox Marxism. In doing so, Sorel and Fanon make the relationship between spontaneity and the problem of “speaking for” much clearer.

Pre-dating post-Marxism by decades, both Sorel and Fanon toy with Marxist categories only to conclude that revolutionary unity is ultimately located in the spontaneous moment of resistance—especially as it pertains to physical violence. In fact, Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence* explicitly argues that violence is crucial to the formation of frontiers, distinguishing the “sham Socialism” of the Parliamentary Socialists, utopians, and the middle-class generally from that of the revolutionary proletariat. Contrary to the reformist “political” general strike, the “revolution appears as revolt, pure and simple” in the “proletarian” general strike, where “no place is reserved for...fashionable people who are in favour of social reforms, and for the Intellectuals who have embraced *the profession of thinking for the proletariat*” (Sorel 151, original emphasis). Sorel’s anti-intellectualism is motivated by his recognition that “middle-class philosophers” have too much to lose to fully commit to the proletarian cause: aiming to “heighten their prestige as humanitarians,” they attempt to persuade the public of their good intentions while hiding their only true passion, the “*hatred of violence*” (106, original emphasis). As with Schmitt’s view of liberals, these reformers wrongly argue that conflict can be reasoned away, with violence merely a “relic of barbarism” that will disappear through appeals to the philanthropic and “magical force of the State” (74, 180).

To middle-class socialism from above, Sorel counter-poses a strictly popular proletarian movement that avoids anti-democratic intellectual co-option because proletarian unity is located in the moment of the general strike. He goes so far as to apply Henri Bergson’s notion of the “myth” to the proletarian strike, indicating its crucial symbolic character. The general strike, he claims, is “the *myth* in which Socialism is wholly comprised.” It is a “body of images” that is “capable of evoking instinctively” the “noblest, deepest, and most moving sentiments” of the proletariat, unifying them “all in a co-ordinated picture,” and therefore giving each “its maximum of intensity” (137, original emphasis). Further, the “myth” signals the inexorable power of the “idea of the general strike.” The idea itself creates a furore where betrayals by leaders or comrades into the middle class “only excite the masses still more to rebellion,” so that the “line of cleavage is never in danger of disappearing” (145).

With this emphasis on the mythical moment, Sorel’s designation of the proletariat as the revolutionary actor is somewhat misleading. For Sorel, the “proletariat” is defined pragmatically, not in terms of rigid and objective boundaries, but in terms of involvement in the spontaneous event, the general strike. In this way, he replaces a concern with the scientific truth of theory with its pragmatic ability to provoke deep-seated sentiments in the masses, and therefore, as Terry Eagleton remarks, Sorel dismisses all rational argument by “‘aestheticiz[ing]’ the process of socialist revolution” (Eagleton 187). The ‘us’ and ‘them’ are constituted only in the moment of class war, as the real revolutionaries are revealed by their willingness to use any means at their disposal “for the purpose of ruining an irreconcilable enemy” (Sorel 298). Many of the oppressed underclasses, such as the lumpenproletariat, are likely to be involved because they have nothing to lose, similar to the ‘true’ industrial proletariat. In this sense, the contingency implied by Sorel’s “myth” is very much a reaction to the Marxist Second International’s belief that deteriorating working conditions would lead the industrial proletariat to revolution out of ‘scientific’ necessity.² Laclau and Mouffe highlight this anarcho-syndicalist aspect of Sorel, only to note he never pursued it to its logical implication. They rightly ask, “Why does this politically or mythically reconstituted subject have to be a *class* subject?” (Laclau and Mouffe 41, original emphasis) As may be

clear already, the simple answer is that Sorel's theoretical framework provides very little reason for his focus on class, and his class language has more to do with his historical context than the logic of his theory.

Indeed, Sonia Kruks suggests that the "classic philosophical formulation" of the tendency that "today culminates in identity politics" is only located around 1950, well after Sorel, in the early works of Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre (Kruks 123). And, writing primarily from Algeria amid the decolonisation process, the need for Fanon to stretch traditional Marxist categories is quite apparent. Fanon's dilemma is that the "economic substructure is also a superstructure" in the colonial context: "you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich" (*Wretched* 40). The violence sustaining colonial rule is along both race and class lines, which combine to create a "Manichean world" divided between settlers, who are allied with the national bourgeoisie, and the colonized peoples (41). Further, the "embryonic proletariat" is not a revolutionary class due to its "comparatively privileged position" in the colonized population. (108) Rather, the rural peasantry and the "landless peasantry," those forced to emigrate to the already-crowded cities to form the lumpenproletariat, comprise the "most spontaneous and the most radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people" (111, 129). In this way, Fanon follows Sorel in stressing the constituting significance of the spontaneous moment, and for very similar reasons.

To begin, Fanon's antipathy toward privileged intellectuals is unmistakable as he chides their naïve nationalism and their inept "theoretical analysis" (113). He argues that, by neglecting the revolutionary impetus of the rural masses, the nationalist leaders' agenda will merely transfer colonial privileges to the national bourgeoisie, with the implication that the nation "becomes not even the replica of Europe, but its caricature" (175). Again, violence is the crucial means of demarcating "friends" and "enemies" of the revolutionary cause. Indeed, Fanon contends, "violence represents the absolute line of action" for the native; a violent act shows dedication to the freedom of the colonized, and therefore creates trust (85). Only the national bourgeoisie—those who stand to benefit from retaining colonial hierarchies—argue that "non-violence" and consensual resolution is "for the public good," unconcerned with the fact that "if the last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists" (61, 37).

While violence has an added "cleansing" significance for Fanon, as will be discussed in the next part, the crucial point for now pertains to the integral relationship between his "Manicheism"—the belief in an irreconcilable dualism—and his assessment of spontaneity. In the first place, there is a clear question on how Fanon's "no compromise" position fares in light of his concluding call for a "new humanism," a new universal principle that would not merely legitimise colonialism (246). Humanism is antithetical to spontaneity and concreteness, as Schmitt's critique of liberalism attests. But Fanon avoids contradiction by posing the "new humanism" as a spontaneous construct, formed in the moment of revolution, and, specifically, violence. This is clear in Fanon's critique of Sartre in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Sartre had identified "negritude," the process of reevaluating 'blackness' to see it in a positive light, as a transitional moment in the proletariat's struggle for socialism—a means toward a *determinate* end. In response, Fanon points out that Sartre's position replicates the Euro-centrism of the old humanism, denying the creative role of blacks in forming their own identity. With Sartre's "intellectualisation of the *experience* of being black," Fanon claims, "it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me" (*Black Skin* 135-7, original emphasis). As Robert Bernasconi remarks, the "new humanism" is only "new" for Fanon because it is created through revolutionary struggle, and it is therefore impossible to know what it will look like. His "silence" in describing the new humanism is purposeful, out of a "logic which necessitates

that it be left as an empty marker” in order to restore the “unforeseeable to its place within historical becoming” (Bernasconi 120-1).

As the “new humanism” shows, the “end” of revolutionary struggle is much more nebulous for Fanon than for Marx. Specifically, identity concerns demand a principal of unity that is purely negative, constructed against an “enemy,” the colonizers and their collaborators. The idea is similar to Laclau and Mouffe’s “hegemony,” except that the process occurs explicitly through violence for Fanon. Spontaneity is necessary to both preserve distinct identities and mobilize the masses with “no speeches or resolutions, and no political trends”: the only premise is an armed and “common front against the oppressor” so that the “nation may exist” (Fanon, *Wretched* 131). It is true that, contrary to Sorel, Fanon provides a sense of the “weaknesses” of spontaneity, arguing some organization is required because “sheer resentment” will not win in the long run (136). But, his musings on the function of leadership are infused with an overriding concern about “speaking for,” laudably aiming to “re-present” the masses instead. The party, Fanon claims, “should be decentralized in the extreme” since it is “not an authority” but the “direct expression of the masses” (185, 187). To believe otherwise is to support the “very Western, very bourgeois and therefore contemptuous attitude that the masses are incapable of governing themselves” (188).

That being said, what is clear is that Fanon, along with Laclau and Mouffe and Sorel, promote spontaneity due to their profound concern with the violence of “speaking for” a heterogeneous radical constituency. Certainly—and quite understandably—Sorel and Fanon are not as thorough as Laclau and Mouffe in their ‘identity politics.’ However, the rejection of the category of “necessity” in all three makes the parallel interesting. Especially notable is Fanon and Sorel’s emphasis on the constituting significance of the spontaneous ‘event,’ an attribute of spontaneity that remains latent in Laclau and Mouffe’s rather philosophical work. The question then is whether Fanon and Sorel’s theories of spontaneity merely appear more forceful due to an *arbitrary* promotion of the most striking event—one involving physical violence—or whether there is something to the ‘logic of spontaneity’ that *intrinsically* points in this direction. As a theory closely affiliated with the decentralized and chaotic unity of “new social movements,” Laclau and Mouffe seem only to provide a principle regulating relations to those on the “inside.” The important question that follows is how their politics cope with modes of resistance against the “outside” that vary considerably between groups in their “chain of equivalence,” including some willing to use any means necessary, and some much less so.

Violence and Revolution, ‘Organized’ or Spontaneous

Of course, the question of regulating a spontaneous movement assumes that an ethical standard is important, and I use Arendt’s notion of power to suggest it is. But, for the purposes of this article, the more significant point pertains to the way spontaneity shifts the terrain of any strategic “means-ends” calculus for the use of violence. This point becomes particularly apparent in looking at Sorel and Fanon’s justifications of violence. It was already indicated that both advocate violence as a central mechanism to inspire and reinforce the growth of a largely spontaneous political movement. Such a position is quite contrary to traditional Marxist critique, where, in Norman Geras’ words, the “spontaneous disposition of the working class to struggle...against capitalist society...is the necessary but not sufficient condition of socialism.” For “revolutionary success,” a “combat organization” is needed to “co-ordinate and lead the struggles,” to “assemble and prepare politically,” and to “centralize and consolidate the historical experience...gained by the working class from its previous struggles”—in sum, there needs to be an organization that is the “instrument of the working class.” The key, for Geras, is simply that this leadership function, traditionally embodied in

the party, must be “reciprocal” rather than “unilateral and pedagogic” (Geras 138-9, original emphasis).

Of course, Geras’ proposition is rife with the danger of “speaking for,” which is especially apparent as he later defends Lenin’s “vanguardism” as a momentary and “polemical” excess in his argument against “spontaneist” Marxism (185-9). However, it also indicates the merit of formal organization as a means for education and debate, an idea that is inherently precluded by spontaneity, with equally disturbing implications. In this regard, it is interesting that Fanon, who does provide some notion of the need for leadership and formal organization, still produces an unambiguous defence of violence. But, his conception of organization is minimalist, overrun by the anti-theoretical and spontaneist thrust dominating the rest of *The Wretched of the Earth*.

It must also be noted that violence has added significance for Fanon in terms of the formation of a liberated, authentic identity. Gail Presbey rightly notes two main aspects of Fanon’s justification of violence, the first emerging through a “psychological study of violence as the native sees it,” and the second in a “strategic revolutionary mode” concerned with its usefulness (Presbey 291). The former is reflected in Fanon’s advocacy of violence as an individual “cleansing force” that “frees the native from his inferiority complex...and restores his self-respect.” Consciousness is therefore “illuminated by violence,” as it restores a sense of commonality among the colonized, against the individualism promoted by the colonizers (*Wretched* 94, 47). When combined with the strategic dimension of violence—the idea that settlers rule through force and “It’s them or us” in the “Manichean world” of colonialism—Fanon provides a powerful justification of violence as the only means possible to end oppression and usher in the “new humanism” (84).

Sorel’s means-ends justification of violence is similar and rather straight-forward. He states outright that the “apology for violence” is “particularly easy” for proletarian violence because it is at least “carried on in broad daylight, without hypocritical attenuation” (Sorel 291). In fact, the “Introduction” to *Reflections on Violence* indicates that he is “not at all concerned to justify the *perpetrators of violence*,” as this is taken for granted: rather, his aim is to “inquire into the function of *violence of the working classes*” (46, original emphasis). This assumption informs a later distinction between force and violence, where force is an act “to impose a certain social order in which the minority governs,” while violence “should be employed only for acts of revolt” (195). As such, violence is a requisite to “smash[ing]” middle-class authority, and will only “end finally by establishing a Socialist State which will replace the middle-class State” (200-1). Consequently, Sorel concludes, violence is not only an “ethical” means, but further, “it is to violence that Socialism owes those high ethical values by means of which it brings *salvation* of the modern world” (295, original emphasis).

Thus far, it is clear Fanon and Sorel both justify violence as a necessary means to achieve their desired end, the “Socialist state” for Sorel and the “new humanism” for Fanon. There are two clear objections to these arguments, both of which help to indicate potential problems in the relationship between spontaneity and violence. The first issue pertains to the potential inconsistency between means and ends; the second is the fundamental ambiguity of the term “violence,” a problem that this article has not yet attempted to rectify. Despite ultimate intentions of a rather liberal orientation, Hannah Arendt’s critique of Sorel and Fanon does provide a valuable elaboration of the first issue. Arendt’s argument is premised on her claim that the inherently public and political dimensions of “action” make it the highest human activity. “Action” recognizes “*the condition...of all political life*,” the “human condition of plurality” (*Human Condition* 7). It is the activity where very distinct—but equally human—individuals freely collaborate in order to create new associations and political arrangements. In this regard, “a life without speech and without action...is literally

dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men” (176).

Arendt’s liberal tendencies are visible in the way this formulation is directly the opposite of Schmitt: while Schmitt’s concern is to restore recognition of the fundamental status of inequality and conflict in politics, Arendt seeks to restore the political by creating conditions for consensus, particularly by eliminating inequalities. But, despite the aversion of radicals such as Laclau and Mouffe towards notions of consensus, the conception of “power” that follows in Arendt’s theory indicates an important consequence of friend/enemy politics. For Arendt, power is essentially defined by the cohesion of individuals, or their ability to “act in concert” (179). Accordingly, “power is always...a power potential” that “springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse” (200). Crucial to Arendt is the difference between violence and this notion of power. Since power is defined by consensus—the ability to “act in concert”—violence, she rightly argues, is its opposite. While power is effective means to pursue an end, “if nothing more were at stake...than to use action as a means to an end, it is obvious that the same end could be much more easily attained in mute violence” (179).

Considering Arendt’s conception of “action,” it should not be surprising that this last claim infuses “power” with a dimension of innate goodness, beyond its ability to attain a particular end. Violence, on the other hand, is characterized precisely by its overwhelming concern with the end, casting means purely in terms of “efficiency.” To this extent, Arendt emphasizes the “instrumental character” of violence, using implements “for the purpose of multiplying natural strength until, in the last stage of their development, they can substitute for it” (*On Violence* 46). The “multiplier” effect signals the vital line of differentiation between power and violence: power inherently a group quality, finding its potential in numbers; by contrast, violence substitutes the “implements of violence” for numbers. Therefore, “power” does not preclude an ‘outside’ as “[t]he extreme form of power is All against One,” whereas the “extreme form of violence is One against All” (42).

There are some persuasive arguments against Arendt’s distinction between power and violence, including that it is a very tidy separation of two concepts that appear historically inseparable. However, Arendt is right to point to the anti-democratic tendencies of violence—tendencies that are overlooked by both Sorel and Fanon. In fact, Sorel explicitly appeals to the multiplier effect of violence, declaring that even though workers have little money to support their movement, they hold the “much more efficacious means of action,” which is the ability to “inspire *fear*,” using violence to profit from “*middle-class cowardice*” (Sorel 68-9, original emphasis). Fanon dwells more on the psychological and strategic necessity of violence. Given Sorel and Fanon’s historical contexts, both arguments are convincing in the sense that the level of popular support for violent tactics surely trumps the level of support such tactics would receive, for example, in twenty-first century North America. But, in an important way, both Sorel and Fanon *assume* violence of the proletariat or the colonized is a mass and inherently revolutionary phenomenon. The problem, as Arendt puts it, responding to Sartre’s claim that violence “can heal the wounds it has inflicted” in the preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* (30), “If this were true, revenge would be the cure-all for most of our ills” (Arendt, *On Violence* 79).

The important issue at the base of Arendt’s claim is the relative ambiguity of Fanon’s ‘spontaneist’ idea of the “new humanism.” Violence becomes the “cure-all” producer of the “new humanism” because there is no consensual accord on the end. More fundamentally, Fanon and Sorel’s theories preclude any real notion of an end—at least a long-term, revolutionary one. As Arendt indicates, the “instrumental” nature of violence means that it is viable only insofar as it is “effective in reaching the end that must justify it.” But, “since...we never know with any certainty the eventual consequences of what we are doing,” Arendt

rightly suggests that violence is only “rational” for clearly defined, immediate goals—“it is more the weapon of reform than of revolution” (*On Violence* 79).

Clearly, branding violence a “weapon of reform” does not suggest that it is never justifiable. Arendt admits as much despite her liberal inclinations. However, unless instigated with consciously defined objectives and parameters, the “danger will always be that the means overwhelm the end” (80). This is especially true given that the ends both Sorel and Fanon indicate can only be classified as “short-term.” The allure of spontaneity in terms of its democratic tendencies simultaneously—and paradoxically—dictates that the only goal is the negatively-defined one of eradicating an “enemy.” In this regard, in order to avoid the ‘Leninist’ vanguard party, Sorel and Fanon are led to the equally ‘Leninist’ conception of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” Though supposedly a transitional phase is the trajectory towards “communism,” what is striking about Lenin’s version of the “dictatorship”—the “proletarian state”—is its extremely militarised character. In general, Lenin defines the state as “the product and the manifestation of the *irreconcilability* of class contradictions”—it is a “special force” for the suppression of one class by another in a given territory (*State* 8-9, original emphasis). In bourgeois society, the “special force” is used by bourgeoisie to suppress the proletariat; while the dictatorship of the proletariat is, as Rosa Luxemburg writes, “the capitalist state turned on its head”—the proletariat use the “special force” to suppress the bourgeoisie (Luxemburg 68).

The crucial point here is that, despite occasionally acknowledging that the proletarian state is “no longer a state in the proper sense,” Lenin’s dictatorship of the proletariat is by definition a negative, coercive and ‘state-like’ organ for the suppression of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat (Lenin, *State* 38). His “simplified view,” as Luxemburg puts it, neglects the “life element” of any revolutionary theory—the “political training and education of the entire mass of the people” (Luxemburg 68). It is true that Fanon, for one, gives some indication of the need to “educate the masses politically” and formally organize. But, these are the moments of Fanon’s work where he appears most Marxian; conversely, as indicated earlier, it is precisely his “spontaneous” tendencies that link Fanon so clearly with identity politics (Fanon 143, 197). The difference is that Lenin responds to the necessity of violence by largely excising democratic concerns, promoting a unidirectional theoretical dogmatism in order to maintain his Marxism. Openly hostile to such an elitist position, Fanon weakens the Marxist emphasis on organization and theory through an overwhelming concern with spontaneity and its unifying mechanism, the violent event.

Sorel is more extreme than Fanon in dismissing educational and organizational matters, leading Antonio Gramsci to rightly criticize his mythic general strike on the grounds that a “collective will” with so “rudimentary a formation” will “cease to exist” after the initial spontaneous moment. It will simply scatter into “an infinity of individual wills which...then follow separate and conflicting paths” (Gramsci 128-9). For both Sorel and Fanon, the casualty is the capacity to “act in concert,” since, aside from the micro-level, internal consensus development is actually discouraged save for the idea of who the “enemy” is. It is this short-sighted property of spontaneity that ultimately connects Sorel and Fanon’s arguments with Laclau and Mouffe’s purer elaboration of spontaneity, as becomes apparent in the second issue their theories raise, the ambiguity of violence.

So far, this article has made a rather purposeful effort to avoid defining violence. The first section treated violence in a much broader sense—having to do with representation—than this section, where violence has been treated basically as an armed or physical phenomenon, following Sorel and Fanon. But, in a way, defining violence very broadly is necessary to prevent Sorel and Fanon from arguing in a Schmittian circle. For Schmitt, friend/enemy distinctions are, by definition, those pertaining to questions of war; likewise, physical violence serves the same function for Sorel and Fanon, separating the proletariat or

colonized from their oppressors. In particular, the association of violence with the development of revolutionary consciousness indicates the self-affirming character of their formulations. If violence is assumed to mobilize and unite the people against their “enemy,” as Fanon and Sorel suggest, it follows that an initial armed struggle by a faction of the larger group is positive to the extent it is *assumed* latent revolutionaries will follow. The result is a position susceptible to the same charge Žižek levels at Schmitt, the “false radicalisation” of politics. The charge can only be avoided by defining violence broadly in order to modify the terrain of friend/enemy, a move that inevitably brings Fanon and Sorel’s theories closer to that of Laclau and Mouffe.

Indeed, there is some support for this position, at least for Fanon. Characterizing violence as fundamentally a “form of taking that which has been or will be refused” rather than just “bullets, knives, and stones,” Lewis Gordon is correct in suggesting that all transformations of power require violence. In this sense, he continues, Fanon is right in suggesting that “non-violent transformation...boils down to no transformation,” and the revolutionary struggle is necessarily violent (Gordon 304). Moreover, implied here is the “tragedy of the colonial and racist situation” in that there is a “price that has to be paid” for the emergence of a “postcolonial, postracist world.” And, even though the oppressors, the colonizers, pay the “price,” they are, “in reality, human beings” just like the oppressed (305).

There certainly is merit to Gordon’s argument, though some qualifications are also necessary. With Fanon’s open discussion of an “armed” or “murderous and decisive” struggle, a broad notion of violence is clearly not what he had in mind, and the same goes for Sorel. What Gordon does accurately provide, however, is a definition of violence consistent with Laclau and Mouffe’s identity politics. To realize the positive identity of those comprising a “radical democratic hegemony,” the *identity* of the “enemy”—as colonizers, patriarchs, capitalists, homophobes—must be violently negated. But, while the nature of Laclau and Mouffe’s notion of violence is ambiguous (broadly defined) and spontaneous (since the articulation of “hegemony” is inherently contingent), this is in fact precisely the point. Just as the revolutionary aim is reduced to the lowest common denominator of opposing the “enemy,” violence is necessarily left at its most abstract level, thereby permitting the various blocs of the “chain of equivalence” to decide on their own concrete means of resistance against the “enemy.” The constituting moment of a revolutionary movement is no longer delimited exclusively by physical violence, but, as with Sorel and Fanon, the end goal is still determined overwhelmingly in the negative.

In terms of Arendt’s discussion of violence, it could first be pointed out that it is not clear how “efficient” this extremely decentralized scenario is, a question that will be returned to in the conclusion. For now, however, more interesting is the idea that too “radical” a notion of democracy may ultimately lead to its collapse. The utter disregard for consensus and formal organization implied by spontaneity mean that the ethics of revolution are decentralized to the micro-level. In a similar way, the negative construction of unity precludes anything more than a pragmatic calculation of the most effective means to attain the end. The problem involved is apparent via a parallel with Baudrillard’s warning regarding Marx’s category of “needs.” Baudrillard’s point is that the category of “needs,” like “use value,” is much too unproblematic in Marx’s work (*For a Critique* 134-7). Marx’s famous slogan, “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs,” presumes, in Baudrillard’s words, that “all instincts are rationalized, finalized, and objectified in needs.” Marx criticizes the “manipulation of needs” in capitalism, only to overlook that any notion of an underlying and “natural” level of needs is equally problematic because very different subjects live in very different contexts (*For a Critique* 134-6; Marx, “Critique” 347).³

But, since plurality is indeed the case, it follows that the focus should be on the process of determining a revolutionary conception of “needs” rather than avoiding the

question altogether in favour of “contingency.” Using Arendt’s terms, while a revolutionary society is by definition a new society, “power”—the ability to “act in concert”—is more revolutionary than “violence” precisely because it has an eye to long term considerations such as what *would be* “needed” in the future (as opposed to what would *not be*). Of course, radicals should determine the appropriate means of revolution in the same consensual manner, lest the allure of the spontaneous ‘spectacle’ take precedence over the presumably more ‘just’ and ‘ethical’ end sought. In other words, the question of the concrete content of ‘violence’ is too important to be decided in a spontaneous and decentralized way.

Part of the problem is the denunciation of formal organization and leadership that follows from Fanon and Sorel’s anti-theoretical premises, as well as Laclau and Mouffe’s more potent rendition of this, “anti-essentialism.” Nicos Mouzelis rightly argues that, due to their “excessive fear of reifying institutional structures,” Laclau and Mouffe “go to the other extreme and analyze practices in an institutional vacuum” (Mouzellis 116). Any notion of a long-term process of organization is prohibited since it would mean that certain subject-positions and interests are ‘essentialized,’ and “certain articulatory practices are more central than others” (115). Faced with a choice between maximizing potential through consensual or spectacular means, ‘difference’ demands that Laclau and Mouffe unambiguously opt for the latter. To conclude this section, the disturbing consequences of this position are illustrated through a brief comparison with Hardt and Negri’s version of ‘post-Marxism,’ which, though contemporary, departs from Marxism in ways quite similar to Fanon and Sorel.

Both Laclau and Mouffe and Hardt and Negri are responding to the ‘post-modernist’ preoccupation with difference, including New Social Movements (NSM’s), and formulate their politics accordingly. As explained earlier, Laclau and Mouffe do so by eliminating the primacy of any subject positions, instead building “radical politics” on the articulation of “equivalences” between diverse agents; meanwhile Hardt and Negri replace the industrial working class with an infinitely heterogeneous “multitude,” unable to communicate and united only by the common condition of “being-against” Empire.⁴ The most obvious difference is the central position of the “economic” in Hardt and Negri’s “Empire,” but also important is their explicit formulation of spontaneous resistance against the “enemy.” In the first place, the “spectacle” is accentuated to the extent that Mitchell Cohen correctly contends that “everyone who is authentically ‘against’ is on the same side of the barricades,” as “‘being-against’ allows Hardt and Negri to bring together under the same rubric Chiapas, fundamentalism and Tiananmen Square” (Cohen 23).

It is by no means clear Laclau and Mouffe would regard religious fundamentalism in the same light, since it generally involves the repression of many identities. However, this disagreement is likely due to a second factor. Alex Callinicos rightly points out that Antonio Negri’s place at the forefront of the Italian autonomism, an extremely decentralized theory of ‘organization’ notoriously represented by the anarchist Black Bloc, is reflected in the *Empire* (Callinicos 122). The practical effect is the promotion of a “cult of violence,” the belief that the spectacular escalation of violence is the true mode of resistance to capitalism. Hardt and Negri’s ideal, Callinicos claims, is the Italian Red Brigades 1977-78 “campaign of armed terror against the Italian State” (126). He goes on to point out two disturbing aspects of this formulation. The first is that the action of autonomist groups is posed as “action on behalf of the masses” or as a “substitute for mass mobilization” (139). Such actions are justified merely because they are against a common enemy.

A second disturbing aspect is the state response provoked by autonomist action. Callinicos concludes that “Genoa exposed very clearly the limits of autonomist politics”—the overwhelming state power crushing the demonstration shows that “only the mass mobilization of the organized working class can counter the concentrated power of the capitalist state” (139, 142). Certainly the broad notion of violence involved in NSM

resistance does not support armed struggle as the only useful means of action; but, at the same time, the necessity of armed struggle is certainly a plausible conclusion if the sole aim is to eradicate the “enemy.” In this sense, what is important about the two different pictures of NSMs is their ultimate consistency: Hardt and Negri’s “autonomism” is a clear illustration of the means/ends calculus of *a single movement* within Laclau and Mouffe’s *overall* decentralized framework. It is therefore not the case that the “false radicalisation” of politics is necessarily implied by Laclau and Mouffe’s logic of spontaneity; however, it is no accident that Sorel, Fanon and Hardt and Negri’s friend/enemy politics all lead in this direction.

Conclusion: How ‘Efficient’ is Spontaneity?

The purpose of this article is by no means to dismiss physical violence, or even spontaneity, and it would be quite presumptuous for a work short on alternatives to do so. Moreover, it seems difficult for anyone interested in social revolution to disagree with Sorel and Fanon’s assumption that the status quo is enormously violent, and that it will only be changed with armed struggle. To be sure, shifting contexts from pre-World War I Europe or Algerian decolonisation to twenty-first century North America decreases the seeming imperatives of armed confrontation, since middle-class activism is often from a safe distance. It should be no surprise, then, that Laclau and Mouffe’s social movement ‘spontaneism’ is best suited for a broad definition of violence, clear on its necessity but allowing micro-groups to determine its content. When analyzed in terms of one of the crucial aspects of Arendt’s definition of violence, this decentralized scenario has an interesting implication for radical politics. For, if violence is characterized by means-ends efficiency, it would seem that spontaneity is the antithesis of violence.

However, Antonio Gramsci rightly notes that “‘pure’ spontaneity does not exist in history” because a “conscious leadership” is always involved in some way, no matter how rudimentary (Gramsci 196). The same notion could be applied to NSM theory, where tactical decision-making exists at an extremely decentralized level. Thus the paradox of spontaneity is apparent. As Naomi Klein claims, contemporary radical politics involves no single movement or “overarching revolutionary philosophy”; instead, it is a “movement of movements,” with the principles of self-determination and diversity at front and centre (Klein 12-3). But, what is gained in diversity is lost in coherence, a proposition with potentially counter-productive consequences if the only point of agreement among the movements is a superficial notion of who the “enemy” is. This is especially disturbing insofar as spontaneity does have its own sort of “multiplier” effect, as Sorel already recognized regarding the creation of fear. In the information age, the multiplier is undoubtedly much larger as spectacles are instantly transmitted worldwide—at least if they are large or gruesome enough to be noticed. It seems quite clear that this is the route NSMs are at least trying to follow, only to face the problem that the size of the “event” must perpetually increase in scale to be noticed. Of course, the increase can occur via a number of means, but this will be no simple task after September 11, 2001, in the wake of what Baudrillard accurately describes as the “‘mother’ of all events” (*Spirit* 4).

¹ For example, see: Karl Marx, “Provisional Rules of the Association,” in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, Vol. 20 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 14.

² Sorel’s reaction to Second International positivism is most clearly seen in the influence of Nietzsche and Bergson on his philosophy. On these influences, and the resulting version of Marxism, see: David Ohana, “Georges Sorel and the Rise of Political Myth,” *History of European Ideas* 13:6 (1991), 737-41.

³ It is not clear that the category of needs is either “natural” or unproblematic in Marx’s view. As Michael Lebowitz explains, Marx held needs constant, at least in *Capital*, as a “working assumption.” Further, Marx frequently criticized economists for treating workers’ needs as “naturally determined and unchanging” (Lebowitz 31-2). Nevertheless, my basic point remains the same.

⁴ On their new “proletariat” and “being-against,” see respectively: Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, pp. 52-3, 210-4.

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