SARTRE ON VIOLENCE,

FOUCAULT ON POWER--A DIAGNOSTIC

When one considers the theme of violence in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, one thinks immediately of that *locus classicus*, his Preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. There, in the hyperbolic fashion characteristic of his occasional pieces, Sartre addresses the issue in terms of the racist violence implicit in colonialism and the bourgeois humanism that seeks to justify it. In rereading that essay, I could not help but recall Sartre's bitter dispute with Albert Camus about Algerian independence. It is as if Sartre had just read the pacifist passage by Tarrou in *The Plague*[1] and scribbled the following gloss in the margin:

> A fine sight they are too, the believers in nonviolence, saying that they are neither executioners nor victims. Very well then; if you're not victims when the government which you're voted for, when the army in which your younger brothers are serving without hesitation or remorse have undertaken race murder, you are, without a shadow of doubt, executioners.[2]

Written in the full heat of the Algerian crisis and at the height of his growing sense of collective responsibility, this text is the terminus ad quem of an evolution in a philosophical theory of violence that had occupied Sartre for some time and which, it seems clear to me, he never resolved to his satisfaction. In his final interview with Benny Lévy, "Hope, Now...," Sartre admits that "fraternity and violence" are two equally necessary aspects of the social bond that he had never succeeded in reconciling.[3]

---

[1] Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Random House, Modern Library, 1948), 222-30.

[2] Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 25.

[3] Benny Lévy and Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Last Words of Jean-Paul Sartre: Hope, Now..." *Dissent* 27 (Fall, 1980), 415. In several respects Sartre's controverted

What I propose to consider is the terminus a quo of this theory or, if not his precise point of departure, at least one of his earliest extended discussions of the topic, namely, that of his posthumously published *Notebooks for an Ethics*. Specifically, I want to examine his extended reflections in what we could call his "sketch for a theory of violence" found in the first of these two published notebooks. I shall then turn to Foucault's remarks on violence in the context of his analysis of power relations in order to ground some comparisons and contrasts between the two thinkers in this regard. This is something like what Foucault would call a "diagnostic" in that it seeks to illuminate, though not capture the essence of, a discursive practice (in this case, the discourse of violence) by means of an assessment of the play of difference that obtains in the respective spaces inhabited by Foucauldian and Sartrean discourse. The topic of violence is one of a number of areas where the interests and writings of these two major theorists overlap. In proposing these reflections, I hope to cast some light, not only on the nature and forms of violence but also on the larger question of the possibilities and limits of dialogue between existentialist and post-structuralist philosophers in general.

Sartre on Violence

In an interview with Madeline Chapsal (1959), Sartre admits that his generation had lived through two periods of "sacred violence," namely, the "holy" war of 1914, and the "holy" revolution of 1917. Many, including himself, had "interiorized" this sacred violence and had redirected the violence of war to that of revolution. "Most of us," he confessed, "were very mild and yet we became violent beings." In a sense that reflects his concomitant dilemma of reconciling fraternity/terror, he continued: "for one of our problems was this: could a particular act be described as one of revolutionary violence or did it rather go beyond the violence necessary for

---

claims in this interview constitute a kind of "return of the repressed" from his earlier thought that seems to have eluded even Simone de Beauvoir, who was so critical of the remarks attributed to him in this piece.

the revolution? This problem has stayed with us all our lives," he mused, "we will never surmount it."[4]words, he is bothered, perhaps "plagued" might be the word, given the subsequent history of this issue in his work, by the age-old question of necessary evil, namely, "How much?"

In the same interview, he spoke with dismay of the "senseless" violence of the next generation of rootless youth that indulged in "an absolutely pure and unconditioned violence." Such violence, he pointed out, "never calls itself into question. It makes no effort to criticize itself. It is in love with itself." As he explained, "one used to think--or at least we thought--of violence as born of exploitation and oppression, and as directed against them. ... In our view, violence could be justified if it were being used to safeguard the interests of the masses, a revolution, etc. But for these delinquents, violence can never be put to use: it is good only when it's senseless" (*BEM* 24). In other words, Sartre is far from propounding violence for its own sake or even from espousing an uncritical, voluntarist use of force as the self-justifying vehicle of social change. As we have come to expect with Sartre, these remarks issue from a theoretical account that he was in the process of formulating at the time (in this case, the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*) and from ideas worked out imagistically in his plays (here, *The Condemned of Altona* and *The Devil and The Good Lord*). But they employ ideas already articulated in his *Notebooks* a decade earlier. Sartre was always an ontologist, a philosopher of the imagination, and a moralist. It is under these descriptions that I wish to consider his mini treatise on violence in the *Notebooks*.

The Ontology of Violence. Sartre said that it was his continued interest in the question of being that separated him from Marxist philosophers.[4] Certainly, whatever theory of violence he begins to fashion in the *Notebooks* springs from his

---

[4]Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Purpose of Writing," in *Between Existentialism and Marxism,* trans. John Mathews (New York: William Morrow, 1976), 23; hearafter cited s *BEM*

[5]See "Interview with Jean-Paul Sartre" in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1981), 14.

well-known phenomenological ontology of *Being and Nothingness*(BN). This is the source of his claim that the ground of violence consists in the fact that the agent of violence "is man (pure destructive consciousness) when he destroys the given in itself of the world, and he is thing when he destroys man." In effect, "in violence one treats freedom as thing while recognizing its nature as freedom." [6] We recognize here the mark of violence in the sado-masochism that qualifies our "concrete relations with others" in BN. In other words, the phenomenological essence of violence is precisely that manipulation of another's freedom so that it is both captive and free, indeed, captive *insofar as* it is free. This is why his frequently employed image of the ambush is so appropriate for ontological violence: it is precisely the free pursuit one's objective that springs the trap.

While admitting it is "an ambiguous notion," Sartre tenders the following definition of "violence" in the *Notebooks*:

To make use of the facticity of the other person and the objective from the outside to determine the subjective to turn itself into an inessential means of reaching the objective. In other words, [to] bring about the objective at any price, particularly by treating man as a means, all the while preserving the *value* of its having been chosen by some subjectivity.

As he explains, "the impossible ideal of violence is to constrain the other's freedom to choose freely what I want." "In this sense," he continues, "the lie is closer to the ideal of violence than [is] that of force. With force, it is clear that I constrain the other, therefore his freedom appears more purely as a refusal of this constraint. In lying, on the contrary, I fool myself for I make myself take the deceived freedom, the freedom set out of play, as free will" (*NE* 204). Sartre is adding a psychological dimension to his account that we shall see Foucault striving to avoid. In this case, it is Sartre's admission (with Foucault) that

---

[6]Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*. Trans. David Pellaur (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 193; hearafte cited as *NE*.

constraint and freedom, seen as refusal, go together, but his insistence that there is a form of constraint, e.g. the lie, that masks the victim's freedom-refusal in the liar's bad faith. This last reaffirms Sartre's continued emphasis on the role of individual praxis, and hence of moral responsibility, in social phenomena.

Violence and the Imaginary. Imaging consciousness is paradigmatic of consciousness in general, for Sartre. In his *The Psychology of Imagination,* he claims it is the locus of possibility, negativity and lack.[5] It is our ability to "derealize" perceptual objects that enables us to consider possibilities, to create mere appearances, and to dissemble. The violence of the boxer's feint or the hunter's trap is a frequent topic of Sartrean discussion. In fact, he devotes a large portion of volume 2 of the *Critique* to an analysis of the institution of boxing in order to explain the intelligibility of struggle and hence of history as we know it (what we might call "material violence"). There is a violence at work in the practical jokes that the young Flaubert loved to play on his friends, an upsetting of the established order, as Sartre puts it, that was reestablished only by the self-conscious laughter of the victim.[6] All this is the work of the imagination as the "faculty" of derealization and deception. Although not all uses of the imaginary entail violence, it seems to me that most, if not all, cases of Sartrean violence employ the imaginary.

But Sartre sees the act of lying as the model of violence, for "the lie transforms man into a thing. But at the same time it wants to keep him free, at least in most cases" (*NE* 198). "The lie places the other's freedom in parentheses, " he explains. "It does not destroy it, it isolates it, withdrawing it from the world by an emptiness, and it is the master who decides whether the object it intends is imaginary or real" (*NE* 199). Consider the case of lying to someone about my accomplishment in order to win her esteem. The person lied to is free and not free at the

[7]See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination,* trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 242-45.

[8]See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot,* trans. Carol Cosman, 5 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981-93), 3:204-208.

same time: free, because I require her free esteem, not free because I bring it about. "Thrown into the imaginary plane, [her] freedom is obturated by the imaginary state of affairs that it intends. But at the same time that it is inoffensive, it still is a freedom that concerns me however much I decide not to be concerned about it (in that it is *me* that it concerns)" (*NE* 199). As Sartre concludes:

> So we find the following ideas in a lie (which belong to the essence of violence): treating freedom *at the same time* as an end and a means, through the superiority of Being or the State over becoming or the dialectical process, therefore wanting to realize the end immediately, and by any means, guaranteeing oneself against a free consciousness by transforming it into a thing, yet in a way depending on his recognizing this. At the same time, there is an element of destruction, but the *reverse* of the one we find in physical violence. In physical violence, one appropriates the freedom and the refusal of the human-reality-in-the-world by crushing it with the world, that is, violence affirms the superiority of the world over consciousness--in a lie one appropriates this freedom and refusal by destroying the world for-the-consciousness-of-the-other, one destroys it subtly by hiding it by means of the imaginary. One takes one's necessary point of mooring from this freedom, and it gets transformed into a dream of transcendence. That is, into pure immanence and passivity. Finally, the lie stems from a failure (real or predicted; the impossibility of getting the truth evaluated for what it is). (*NE* 199-200).

The lie is a kind of compendium of the elements of Sartrean violence. Let me summarize it as such, focusing on five aspects characteristic of both:

(1) Like the lie, violence exhibits an option for the *inertia and passivity* of the victim as thing. He or she is manipulated in quasi-causal fashion as in the ambush or the practical joke. Violence both exploits the ambiguity of the in-itself/for-itself

ontology of human reality and inherits its ultimate failure--like the liar, the victim is both inert and spontaneous, and the perpetrator wishes it so;

(2) The lie entails a *denial of temporality*, specifically the dimension of the future, which Sartre insists is ingredient in every act of violence. In a manner reminiscent of his analysis of emotional consciousness in *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* where one literally "jumps for joy" in a quasi magical attempt to possess a good "all at once," Sartre insists that violence is a negation of time in the sense of a refusal of being-in-the-world in favor of immediacy.[7] (He accepts Heidegger's thesis that being-in-the-world and ekstatic temporality are coextensive, if not identical.) But immediacy is the "timeless" time of nature, of things. Sartre sees two equivalent ways of negating time in the violent act. The first is by appeal to analytic necessity--for example, the mathematical rigor of physical nature indifferent or hostile to human intentions, carried over into the identity and essence of the violent man who simply acts automatically. The second manner of negating temporality in violence occurs by the sheer power of a will that devastates: pure universal freedom for the agent but destructive consciousness for others. In fact, we recognize here the lived ambiguity of the existential "situation," translated into the context of destruction: "[The violent individual] vacillates perpetually between a refusal of the world and a refusal of man" (*NE* 177). The refusal of the world is the symbolic destruction of my facticity by way of the destroyed world that I may exist as total transcendence, as "pure nihilating power, pure freedom" (*NE* 175).

Although Sartre is phenomenologically astute in observing the implicit collapse of temporal spread of lived time into the atemporal instant, he overlooks one of the most prevalent forms of violence, namely that which infects the future by means of threat. Waiting in the Dentists' office, especially in full sound of the machinery, is often as bad or worse than the physical experience itself. Indeed, that is precisely why the ritual of torture in some societies required a display of the instruments to

---

[7]See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Emotions. Outline of a Theory*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), 68-70.

the potential victim as an initial step in the process, one that often sufficed, as one can imagine.

(3) The element of *destruction* that Sartre finds in any lie is ingredient in violence as well. In fact, he claims that "violence does not know how to put things together," that the destructive person is claiming, in effect, to be the "Anticreator" (*NE* 175). Again, this remark reminds me of an observation Sartre made apropos the work of Jean Genet: "The same insufficiency enables man to form images and prevents him from creating being."[8] The nihilating power of consciousness in the case of the violent individual becomes symbolically an "annihilating" force through the imagination, but one that spills over into relationships in the real world.

Some have pointed out an apparent shift of position, if not outright contradiction, in Sartre's claims about the nonconstructive character of violence.[9] While claiming in the *Notebooks* that "violence does not know how to put things together," Sartre is equally emphatic in the Fanon Preface and in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* that "this irrepressible violence..is man recreating himself" (Preface, 21). Such "counterviolence," it is argued, is clearly productive. In response, I would suggest that what we shall see Sartre calling "counterviolence" by its very nature is only indirectly constructive in the sense that it removes the obstacles to a fully human life. What is positive throughout such violence is "the implicit comprehension of the human" on the part of the slaves (NE 405); in other words, the "preunderstanding" that the oppressed and exploited have of what they could be: "When his rage boils over, [the native] rediscovers his lost innocence and he comes to know himself in that he himself creates his self" (Preface, 21).

(4) The violent person lives in *bad faith* because "however far he carries his destructions, he counts on the richness of the world to support them and perpetually to provide new things to

---

[10]Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: George Braziller, Mentor Books, 1963), 389.

[11]Thus Ronald E. Santoni in an address, "Sartre on Violence: A Trajectory of Ambivalence?" delivered to the Sartre Circle in Philadelphia, December 28, 1997.

be destroyed (175). But this is true of the liar as well, as the Epimenidean paradox reminds us. For the very possibility of lying depends for its meaning on there being something like truth to which it forms the counter-concept.

(5) Finally, the lie (and the violence it incarnates), is a form of self-defeating behavior (*conduite d' échec*). It joins the magical world of emotional consciousness and the imaginary, in Sartre's vocabulary, as a way of evading the harsh demands of praxis and the real. The "neurotic art" of Flaubert's 19th-century aestheticism was a form of failure behavior. Indeed, Sartre often insisted that, in art, one must lie to tell the truth. To the extent that this aesthetic deception was not innocent (as, for example, in the malevolent "choice" of the imaginary by Genet and Flaubert), it was equally violent.

So it seems we should distinguish two forms of deception, the voluntary (as in the suspended disbelief of the aesthetic attitude) and the involuntary, which would include the violence undergone by the victim of the lie or the trap. Given the need for freedom as a condition for violence both for Sartre and for Foucault, as we shall see, nonvoluntary violence would seem an inappropriate, if not a contradictory, expression. So "dying a violent death" would be at most an accommodated expression in Sartrean discourse. He implies as much when he distinguishes what we might call "moral" violence from physical violence.

Violence and the Moral. As I said, Sartre was at heart a moralist much as was Albert Camus, but never a moralizer. He was perhaps inadvertently composing his own epitaph when he wrote of Camus on the occasion of the latter's death: "In this century and against history he was the representative and the present heir of that long line of moralists whose work perhaps constitutes what is most original in French literature."[10]

The matter of violence was clearly ingredient in his ethical reflections. We saw it's reflection in the question of how much necessary evil could be permitted in the name of socioeconomic change. Biographically, he admitted that he went through a

---

[12]Jean-Paul Sartre, "Albert Camus," in *Situations , IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 127.

period of "amoral realism"[11] during which he subscribed to the pragmatist maxim that "one cannot make an omelet without breaking a few eggs." And there was an evolution in his ethical thinking that has been nicely charted by Tom Anderson.[12] Relevant to our topic, it suffices to note that the issue of being moral in a society of oppression and exploitation has engaged Sartre ever since his famous footnote to *Being and Nothingness* mentioning the possibility of an ethics of authenticity. In the *Notebooks*, which were to deliver that promised ethics, he contrasts violence with positive reciprocity as methods that thwart and further the advent of History and of the properly ethical respectively (see *NE* 21-22). While we shall observe him speak of an "ethic of violence" just as he sometimes refers to a "bourgeois ethic," it is clear that the ethical properly speaking, that set of relationships between free agents mutually respecting and fostering one another's freedom--that this ideal, at least in our present socioeconomic condition, is simply that. Of course, in the *Critique* Sartre introduces the quasi transcendental fact of material scarcity, that turns history as we know it into a warring camp. Henceforth he will describe "violence" as interiorized scarcity. But already in the *Notebooks* he characterizes several of his ethical concepts as entailing violence. Let us consider three.

1) The Spirit of Seriousness. Anyone familiar with *BN* will recognize this inauthentic attitude. It denotes the mind-set of the moral absolutist and especially that of the believer in transcendent moral values or norms. The antithesis of moral creativity such as Sartre proposes in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, this individual slavishly follows external rules, to which he willingly sacrifices individual goals or interests and at times even the individual himself. So Sartre can write that the spirit of seriousness is a form of violence because it posits values as transcendental to freedom, as demands *on* freedom rather than as demands *of* freedom, as the existentialist proposes

---

[11]Philippe Gavi, Jean-Paul Sartre, Pierre Victor, *On a raison de se révolter* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 79.

[14]See Thomas C. Anderson, *Sartre's Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993).

(see *NE* 211-212).

2) The Ethic of Rights and Duties. Both Sartre and Foucault have been critical of the theory of human rights that grew out of the 18th-century Enlightenment. Sartre insists that the "rights of man" are bourgeois "rights" and that the "man" they denote is the bourgeois individual. Foucault points out that the same Enlightenment that brought us "the liberties" (the theory of rights) also brought us the "disciplines" that he uncovered as techniques of surveillance and control in our modern, "carceral" society.[13]

In the *Notebooks*, Sartre is outspoken in his criticism: "There has never been any violence on earth," he asserts, "that did not correspond to the affirmation of some right" (*NE* 177). To understand this claim, we should note that Sartre sees absolute right as that which demands compliance regardless of whatever factual objections or harm might ensue in its pursuit: *Fiat iustitia, ruat coelum.* "Hence pure violence and pure right," he insists, "are one and the same" (*NE* 177). And even if most rights are not absolute, their tendency to trump the claims of other freedoms makes them potentially violent. "All violence presents itself as the recuperation of a right," he notes, "and, reciprocally, every right inexorably contains within itself the embryo of violence" (*NE* 177).

If one were to contrast the Sartrean ethic as developed in this text with the Kantian one (which serves as his model of an ethic of rights and duties), one could summarize the difference as that between *demand* and *appeal*. On Sartre's reading, an ethic of rights and duties is rule-driven, impersonal, and exceptionless. It is an ethic of acontextual obligations and demands. Its drive toward unity and uniformity is implicitly violent in its neglect of the singular and idiosyncratic. "Since the end of demand is absolute and unconditioned," Sartre writes, "it is not in a situation" (*NE* 254). He shares with Levinas a distrust of systems that fail to respect singularity and difference in their rage for the One and the Same. "The goal and final justification of violence," he insists, "is always *unity*. If a

---

[13]Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 222.

situation requires violence, in springing up, this violence projects before itself the total unity of being through destruction" (*NE* 186). If "demand" is violent in its insensitivity to the unique situation of each agent, "appeal" is the bond among freedoms that respects the individual in his or her singularity. In fact, the gift-appeal relationship emerges from the *Notebooks* as the model for the non-alienating reciprocity that authentic morality requires.

3) Bad Faith. Although Sartre has insisted that this expression carries no ethical implication and that, in effect, it is purely descriptive in nature, I agree with many of his commentators that such is not the case. Sartre's use of the expression reveals a distinct judgment of disvalue. Consequently, his characterization of the man of violence as being in bad faith reflects another dimension of violence as an evil. The bad faith of the ethic of duty stems from what Sartre calls the "internalized violence" of having another in me, in this case my obligation, refuse to take account of my situation, projects, temporality and means. In a phenomenological analysis of the voice of conscience, Sartre continues: "Another continually repeats, 'I do not want to know.' There is bad faith because, to calm my anxiety and surmount my facticity, I perpetually maintain the position that *I* am an other and this other is not me. *I want*, all the while abdicating the responsibility for wanting it, a consciousness that *I do not want* what I want" (*EN* 258). In other words, in feeling the obligation to do *my* duty, I deliberately conceal from myself the fact that *I* am the origin of this obligation that I ascribe to a transcendent source.

These combine with other elements into what Sartre calls "an ethics of violence" which, it seems, is the only "ethics" that our society of oppression and exploitation will suffer. I shall not enumerate the fourteen principles of what Sartre calls "the ethics of force (which, as he explains, is simply an ethics of violence justifying itself)." They resemble the voluntarist principles of Fascist morality as Sartre would have experienced it under the Vichy regime, with a critical nod toward the willingness of Stalinism to sacrifice one generation for the good of another (see *NE* 207).

Sartre distinguished a variety of forms of violence that permeate a life. For example, there is what we might term "epistemic" violence (authority as the other in us), generational violence (between parent and child), philosophical violence ("Hegelian dialectic," he insists, "is the very image of violence" [*EN* 184]) and, of course, the "material violence" of interiorized scarcity. It would seem that any constraint on my consciousness-freedom that is imposed by another freedom contrary to my willing it (including my own freedom as other, e.g., in the spirit of seriousness) through the mediation of what he will later call the "practico-inert" in the *Critique*[14] entails a form of violence. In fact, in the *Critique* he will make the blanket claim: "The only conceivable violence is that of freedom against freedom through the mediation of inorganic matter." [15]

I shall conclude this survey of Sartre's sketch of a theory of violence by mentioning three types of violence that he insists any treatise on violence would have to include, namely, Offensive, Defensive, and Counterviolence (see *NE* 207). Most of the forms of violence we have discussed thus far would be considered types of offensive violence. They are initial forms that provoke other violence.

But Sartre speaks of another type, defensive violence, that is a violent defense against nonviolent processes. He cites two examples: the breaking off of a discussion with the refusal to hear the appeal of another freedom and, secondly, the *ad hominem* argument as a refusal of recognition of another freedom. These all share Sartre's basic feature of turning a free agent into a thinglike identity while wishing that he or she remain free. In other words, they are all projects in bad faith.

---

[14]"Practico-inert" is Sartre's technical term for matter insofar as it has absorbed the sediment of prior human actions (praxes). Thus language, socioeconomic class, and social institutions, for example, are practico-inert phenomena. I develop this notion in the context of Sartre's social philosophy in my *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism: The Test Case of Collective Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 93-104.

[15]Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: New Left Books, 1976), 736.

Counterviolence, of which *The Wretched of the Earth* will form the classic example, is fundamentally the negation of negation, the refusal of an identity imposed on the individual or group from without, that entails turning the tables on the oppressors by objectifying the objectifiers (the strategy of *BN*) or luring them into the unreal realm of the literary imagination where their advantage is surrendered (the strategies of Genet and Flaubert) or physically taking back what had been violently taken from the exploited (the strategy of the revolution). In this last case in particular, the problem of "measure" comes strikingly to the fore. For the tendency of the revolution to devour its own was not lost on Sartre, especially as the author of the *Critique*, and, despite some wavering, he never subscribed to the pragmatic justification of sacrificing the working class to the betterment of its successors. An ideal universe, he argues, where some absolute end, whether humanity or the city of ends, is prepared only by treating the workers for the time being as means to that end--such a universe is a caricature of the city of ends. The genuine city of ends, he claims, can have no meaning except it be freely chosen (see *EN* 207).

Rather than a side issue, violence is an abiding concern of Sartre, especially in the second half of his career. But already in the immediate postwar years when the *Notebooks* were composed, we discover him coming to terms with the challenge of trying to reconcile the inevitable violence of our interpersonal and social lives with the full freedom of the existentialist individual that he had championed in *BN*.

Foucault on Power/Violence

If one thinks of "violence" in the thought of Foucault, one probably has in mind his famous "genealogy" of the penal system, *Discipline and Punish*. But even there, the emphasis is on surveillance and control, features he extrapolates to our entire "carceral society," rather than on violence as such. In fact, it is most likely that one is associating violence with power, the pivot of his genealogical analyses, when one makes this move, for *Discipline and Punish* is an analysis of power relations, even if that expression receives more detailed consideration in his next book, *History of Sexuality, Vol.* 1. So

we should briefly consider the topic of "power" in Foucault's work as a propaedeutic to our discussion of violence, if only to indicate why they are distinct.

I shall turn briefly to Foucault's contrasting position in order to appreciate its similarities to and differences from the Sartrean project. At first blush, the differences are great and seemingly irreconcilable. Sartre is a philosopher of consciousness and subjectivity, a totalizer and given to searching out the moral responsibility implicit in any appeal to impersonal necessity and system. Foucault rejects philosophies of consciousness and subjectivity along with totalizing thought in favor of impersonal rules and what he calls "system." In fact he christened his position at the Collège de France "Chair in the History of Systems of Thought." It is systems, not systematizers, that interest him. Though scarcely trapped in the prison house of language, Foucault's linguistic turn is far more evident than is Sartre's. And when he directs his attention to the nondiscursive, and especially to power relations (for "Power" as a substantive entity that an individual or a group might possess does not exist), Foucault's analysis is as suggestive as it is elusive. Let me state three theses about Foucault's use of "power" in order to focus on his understanding of violence, the better to compare and contrast the latter with that of Sartre.

Thesis one: The term "power" denotes a set of *strategic* relations between individuals and/or groups, which are *constructive* as well as negative, impersonal yet oriented, that afford an alternative perspective for analyzing individual and social experience. As a set, these relations can be configured in a variety of ways according to the "conceptual needs" of the investigator and the historical conditions that obtain at the time.[16]

Thesis two: These relations are relations of struggle and hence entail the concomitant notion of *resistence*. As one could begin one's analysis with the fundamental experiences that constitute the locus of such struggles (madness, clinical

---

[16]See Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 209; hereafter cited as *BSH*.

medicine, crime, sexuality), which Foucault has done in as many "histories," so one can focus on the forms of resistance ingredient in these agonistic relations (e.g., insanity, illness, illegality, perversion, respectively), as he has done as well. While allowing that there may be other forms, Foucault distinguishes three types of struggle, namely, those against domination (ethnic, social, religious), against exploitation (that separate individuals from what they produce), and against forms of subjectivation or governance of self and others (that constitute individuals of a certain type and tie them to themselves or submit them to others--e.g., the category of the bourgeois individual or that of the alien). As he remarks elsewhere, "The individual ... is not the vis-à-vis of power; it is ... one of its prime effects."[17] But the object of genealogical investigation is not so much the controlling institution or "authority" as it is the *techniques*, the forms assumed by the exercise of power (*BSH* 212). Foucault is popularly conceived as being concerned more with the how of power relations that constitute individuals than with the who of those individuals themselves. And, indeed, his discourse is impersonal and "objective" as befits a philosophical historian of science.

Thesis three: If power struggles are impersonal, they nonetheless obtain between individuals or between groups, a claim that places Foucault closer to Sartre then he perhaps would like to be.[18] Foucault is not concerned with our control of nature. That kind of "power" he calls "capacity." Although he speaks of the structures or the mechanisms of power, he warns us, "it is only insofar as we suppose that certain persons

---

[19]Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures" in *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 98; hereafter cited as *P/K* with title of entry and page.

[20]In an implicit criticism of Sartre and Camus he remarks: "Such an analysis [in terms of "everything being political"] should not be crushed in an individual culpabilization (of the sort practiced a few decades ago, above all in the existentialism of self-flagellation--you know: everyone is responsible for everything, there isn't an injustice in the world of which we are not at bottom the accomplices)...." from "Interview with Lucett Finas" in *Michel Foucault: Power, Truth, Strategy*, ed. Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton (Sydney: Feral Publications, 1979), 72.

exercise power over others. The term 'power,'" he explains, "designates relations between partners" (*BSH* 217). In sum, "power" denotes "action on the action of others," as he will occasionally remark.

For all his emphasis on system and structure as well as on the power of certain techniques to constitute individuals of a certain type (e.g., the "docile bodies" of *Discipline and Punish*), he sounds like Sartre when acknowledging the need "to identify the agents responsible" for the social domination generically attributed to the bourgeois class:

> One needs to investigate historically, and beginning from the lowest level, how mechanisms of power have been able to function. In regard to the confinement of the insane, for example, or the repression and interdiction of sexuality, we need to see the manner in which, at the effective level of the family, of the immediate environment, of the cells and most basic units of society, these phenomena of repression or exclusion possessed their instruments and their logic, in response to a certain number of needs. We need to identify the agents responsible for them, their real agents (those which constituted the immediate social *entourage*, the family, parents, doctors, etc.) And not be content to lump them under the formula of a generalized bourgeoisie. (*P/K* 100-101)

Not that Foucault is subscribing to something like Sartre's primacy of individual praxis in social causation.[19] It is the "mechanisms of power" that he wishes to uncover, the techniques and procedures that at a certain moment in time serve the "interests" of the bourgeoisie. Still, in another context, he is willing to allow that the question of who is struggling against whom, the question of the subject or rather the subjects is "what is preoccupying [him]." He admits he is not sure what the answer is. But when pressed, he suggests as "just a hypothesis" that it's a matter of "all against all. There aren't

---

[21]A thesis that I develop in my *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism*, 104-112.

immediately given subjects of the struggle, one the proletariat, the other the bourgeoisie," he explains. "Who fights against whom? We all fight each other. And there is always within each of us something that fights something else." His questioner, the Lacanian analyst, J-A Miller, speaking like a Sartrean, urges him to concede that "strictly speaking individuals would be the first and last components" of such a struggle. To which Foucault responds: "Yes, individuals, or even sub-individuals"--a clever way of not answering the question, it seems to me ("The Confessions of the Flesh," *P/K* 207-208).

In light of the foregoing, we can address the relation between power and violence as well as contrast both with Sartre's use of "violence" as we have delineated it from the *Notebooks*. In this regard the following remarks are especially relevant in their image of Foucauldian violence as possessing a quasi-mechanical character:

> What defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future. A relationship of *violence* acts upon a body or upon things; it forces, it bends, it breaks on the wheel, it destroys, or it closes the door on all possibilities. Its opposite pole can only be passivity, and if it comes up against any resistance it has no other option but to try to minimize it. On the other hand, a power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship: that "the other" (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end *as a person who acts* [think of Sartre's description of the sadistic relationship in *BN*]; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up.

He goes on to point out that appeal to power relationships "does

not exclude the use of violence any more than it does the obtaining of consent." In fact, he concedes that "the exercise of power can never do without one or the other, often both at the same time." But he insists that "even though consensus and violence are the instruments or the results, they do not constitute the principle of the basic nature of power. ... In itself the exercise of power is not violence; nor is it a consent which, implicitly, is renewable. It is *a total structure of actions* brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it make easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely [e.g., Sartre's ethics of duty]; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action." (*BSH* 220, emphasis mine).

And this brings us to the chief area of comparison with the existentialist view, namely, the basic interplay of power and *freedom* in Foucault's analysis:

> When one defines the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the actions of others, when one characterizes these actions by the government of men by men--in the broadest sense of the term--one includes an important element: freedom. *Power is exercised only over free subjects and only insofar as they are free.* By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realized. Where the determining factors saturate the whole there is no relationship of power; slavery is not a power relationship when man is in chains. ... Consequently there is no face to face confrontation of power and freedom which is mutually exclusive ([such that] freedom disappears everywhere power is exercised), but a much more complicated interplay. (*BSH* 221, emphasis mine)

"At the heart of the power relationship," he concludes, "and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the

intransigence of freedom. Rather than speaking of an essential freedom [as does Sartre], it would be better to speak of an 'agonism'--of a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation" (*BSH* 221-22).

The Diagnostic

Foucault has referred to archaeology as a "diagnostic" and has claimed that "archaeology is in the plural.[20] Though I do not intend to undertake an archaeological analysis of the discursive and nondiscursive practices of violence in existentialism and Foucauldian genealogy, we are in a position to reflect comparatively on the two foregoing approaches to the question. In this respect I submit the following observations by way of conclusion.

Granted that Sartre speaks from an articulated ontological background which Foucault has explicitly rejected, both insist that violence (when it accompanies, "power" in Foucault's case) can obtain only between free individuals or groups. This is a promising bridge between the two thinkers and doubtless accounted for their shared involvement in acts of political liberation and protest. Unlike the postmodern "differend" where it is precisely such bridge concepts that are missing, the experience of freedom forms a likely starting point for comparison and contrast.[21] Where they would differ is in the theoretical meaning of this "freedom": for Sartre it is ontological and originary, for Foucault it is empirical and nonfoundational.

Yet even here, each would accept a thick sense of "socioeconomic" freedom whereby an individual's choices are

---

[20]Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1972), 157.

[21]See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). In this regard, Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Experience of Freedom*(Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), both the idea and the text, might serve as a convenient *tertium comparationis*.

not constrained by the reduction of all possibilities to one, as Sartre would put it in the *Critique*, or where determining factors saturate the whole, as we have observed Foucault say.

But the two philosophers differ sharply concerning (a) the model of social intelligibility, (b) the means of analysis, and (c) the goal of emancipation from violence.

a) Where Sartre is thoroughly anthropocentric in his account, stressing the epistemic primacy of organic praxis, Foucault has gloried in awakening us from our anthropological slumber and thereby freeing us once more "to think" and, specifically, to think against ourselves. His genealogical analyses are meant to open new possibilities for sense-making that equally create new alternatives for practical choices. Still, we find a conceptual overlap in that each appeals to struggle and agonism respectively as a way to historical intelligibility.[22]

b) Sartre's progressive-regressive method, which is a (sometimes disfunctional) marriage of phenomenology, existential psychoanalysis and historical materialism--in other words, a Marxian existentialist dialectic--such a method is expressly consigned by Foucault to the 19th century! In one moment of pique or candor, he described Sartre as a man of the 19th- century trying to think the 20th.[23] Foucauld's method is "positivist" (with scare quotes) and "historical" (with a similar caveat). It has undergone a certain expansion through three phases, namely, the archaeological, the genealogical and, I would argue, that of "problematization." Of the three, the genealogical most closely approximates that of Sartre. Although their common Nietzschean inspiration makes both thinkers suspicious of the "sincerity" of *les bien-pensants*, Foucault is more attuned to the structural conditioning that makes possible certain lines of power that constitute the objects of rational discourse. And whereas Sartre distinguishes dialectical from

---

[22]Though the matter cannot be pursued here, I have discussed it in my *Sartre, Foucault and Historical Reason. Vol. 1 Toward an Existentialist Theory of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), especially Chapter 10.

[23]Michel Foucault, Interview with C. Bonnefoy (1966), *Dits et écrits*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald with the collaboration of Jacques Legrange, 4 vols. (Paris: Galimard,1994), 1:541-42.

analytical reason and underscores the political commitments of each, Foucault is especially sensitive to the history of reason itself and to the fact that "there is no incompatibility between violence and rationality" (*Dits et écrits*, 3:803).

c) Nowhere does Sartre's character as a philosopher of the imagination come more clearly into focus than in his ideal of a city of ends that guides his project throughout most of his career. This translates into "History" (in an evaluative sense) and into the "society of abundance" as the *als ob* that directs and unifies our socioeconomic struggles. And even if he is chastened by the thought that human freedom could betray its finest sentiments, Sartre remains hopeful in his last years that exploitation and oppression can be lessened and perhaps even eradicated. Foucault, on the contrary, is coldly "realistic" (which, for Sartre, means "pessimistic") about any long-range goals or talk of emancipation in any sense. Rather, like Camus but for different reasons, he favors limited projects and attainable goals. Talk of universal emancipation, he believes, is counterproductive, the work of the "universal intellectual" (*P/K* 126) of which it is commonly assumed he took Sartre as an example. To this he contrasts the "specific intellectual" like J. Robert Oppenheimer, who from his field of expertise addresses issues of profound significance for the welfare of the human race. Such an intellectual, Foucault insists, is no longer the rhapsodist of the eternal, but the strategist of life and death" (*P/K* 129).

And what of the potential dialogue between these two approaches to social ethics? Briefly, I suggest that one, if not the only, space for fruitful exchange lies in the field of *freedom*. Let this be seen as conceding too much to the existentialist, recall the importance Foucault assigns to that term in his analysis of power relations as well as the practical confluence of these two approaches in acts of social struggle, protest and reform (if not revolt). In this respect and as a parting suggestion of a source for further inquiry, I would mention Jean-Luc Nancy's discussion of the experience of freedom, both in a book by that name and elsewhere. It does not hurt that he shares with both Sartre and Foucault a respect for and a certain resonance

with the work of Martin Heidegger.[24]

*   *   *

It could be said that Sartre's account of violence is a function of
his dualism of spontaneity and inertia that infects every facet of
his thought even at its most "dialectical." Sartre's notion of
violence is an immediate example of his ontology of the
either/or. This emerges, for example, in his account of absolute
right in terms of violence. There is no room for compromise or
for "prima facie" duties in such a theory, which makes the
implicit violence in the concept of absolute right/duty as
understandable as it is unfortunate.

Foucault is ready to distinguish violence from the power
that it seems frequently to accompany without shading into.
What burdens his approach is its insistence on sustaining a
violence that holds among free individuals, themselves the
products of power relations. In other words, Foucault's account
holds quite well for "structural" violence, the kind of relation
that Sartre's social ontology would ascribe to the practico-inert.
Where it is less than satisfactory is in explaining those all too
frequent cases where individuals deliberately undermine the
freedom of other individuals. Here the answer to the question
"Who is struggling with whom" requires more than the
Hobbesian response that Foucault tenders.

In sum, on the question of violence as with so many other
areas of potentially common interest, Foucault's unresolved
problem is that of accounting for the human *agency* that
responsible resistance requires, whereas Sartre's is not only that
of reconciling positive reciprocity and violence (fraternity and
terror) but also the more basic issue of coming to acknowledge
the full force of structural conditioning in human history. If the
diagnosis in each case is clear, the prognosis is not, especially
since the two subjects are now deceased. Apropos of Sartre,
Raymond Aron once insisted on the impossibility of reconciling
Kierkegaard and Marx. In the present context, one might
observe that the very impossibility of reconciling praxis and

---

[26]See above, note #22.

structure, consciousness and thing, conditions the violence that obtains, not only within the works of these two philosophers but between them as well. Yet the possibility of this impossibility itself is a kind of *agonistic freedom*, the experience of which urges us to settle neither for quiet resignation nor for pacific possession. Perhaps this is the legacy of both men to our post-modern situation.

Emory University   THOMAS R. FLYNN