

George Ciccariello-Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.
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Violence or Counterdiscourse? A Review of *Decolonizing Dialectics* by George Ciccariello-Maher

Two Stars. That's the rating of *Decolonizing Dialectics* on Amazon, as well as *Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in Venezuela* (2016) and *We Created Chávez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution* (2013). That score is, of course, part of the broadly negative response initiated by the Alt-Right to Ciccariello-Maher's *non-academic* writing in which he has been an outspoken critic of a variety of issues plaguing American democracy, such as gun violence, white supremacy, and Trumpism, particularly the latter's reinforcement of the doctrines of racial and gender subordination. Ciccariello-Maher's outspokenness and the violent response to it, which includes threats to his family, led him to resign from Drexel University as Associate Professor of Politics and Global Studies at the end of 2017. In a particularly ironic lesson about academic freedom and the possibilities for the next generation of PhDs, Ciccariello-Maher was suspended from teaching at Drexel just the week prior to his speaking to my own class in fall 2017 about *Decolonizing Dialectics*. He is one of a growing number of academics whose speech, whether on the pages of a book or in tweets or posts, is being attacked, confusingly, as both left and liberal, as anti-American, as morally bankrupt, and as supportive of terrorism. Thus, the public two-star rating together with groans within the academy that we don't need another book on dialectics, compel a review of the book that acknowledges the increasingly hostile political landscape faced by academics, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. It compels a questioning of academic speech that while not initially public facing has nonetheless become such, wherever it runs contrary to conservative social values. And while social conservatism can tolerate *counterdiscourse*, to the extent that it never threatens the larger historical and philosophical conditions of possibility for contemporary democracy, the speech of academics has increasingly been received *not* as counterdiscourse but as violence. It is a violence that has received a disproportionately violent response, such as the death threats received by

Ciccariello-Maher and other academics targeted by the Alt-Right. This opens up the question, is academic speech violence or counterdiscourse and where in the tension or dialectic between the two does academic freedom truly lie? If we read *Decolonizing Dialectics* as Ciccariello-Maher's answers, it suggests that to the extent that we challenge systems of oppression in our academic writing, our speech is always already composed of tensions. These tensions, however, become the most productive when they reach the ends of possibility of counterdiscourse and its circumscription of academic freedom, and formally erupt into violence.

Decolonizing Dialectics is Ciccariello-Maher's third book and it emerges out of his dissertation work at UC Berkeley. Like Vivek Chibber's *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (2013), this book is also a recovery of sorts, a recovery of the dialectical tradition for understanding contemporary struggle in the developing world. Unlike Chibber's, however, this book isn't interested in correcting what post- and de-colonial scholars have gotten wrong about the tradition, but in rescuing us from its teleological ends, a far more ambitious project. The book better fits within the vein of such works as Cedric Robinson's masterpiece *Black Marxism* (2000), which was not content to simply identify a black radical tradition but simultaneously argued that the dominant account of historical materialism was in fact flawed, overdetermined, and unnecessarily foreclosed. Ciccariello-Maher achieves something similar when he identifies a "counterdiscourse" within the material and idealist traditions, suggesting that we have not always precisely understood their shaping forces: how they are as much marked by particularity and divergent strands as by universality. In his rejection of what he terms the "false universals that portray the present as complete" (p.7), Ciccariello-Maher begins at the end, the "end of history" (Francis Fukuyama) allowing him to proclaim that "[o]urs is a newly dialectical age" (p.1). This dialectical epoch after the end of history is characterized not by a preoccupation with ends but by the lack of reciprocity between social and historical positions and between ontological and phenomenological positions, which don't allow for simple reconciliation. This leads to the binary strategy of the book: to recover the dialectical tradition for post- and de-colonial scholarship and to decolonize the tradition itself. The two-fold "rupture" and recovery is part of his argument that while the radical countercurrent of the dialectical tradition he identifies is crucial in moving us

away from teleological ends, it is not sufficient in and of itself. “[I]t is not possible,” Ciccariello-Maher writes, “to decolonize without radicalizing. Any process of decolonization that shies away from incessant dialectical tensions, the contingency of struggle, and the indeterminacy of the future risks reiterating the history of actually existing decolonization that Fanon unceremoniously dismissed as the ‘dead end’ and ‘sterile formalism’ of bourgeois nationalist rule” (p.11).

The first critical move in the book is to identify a countercurrent strain in the dialectical tradition, within which ends always remain “a horizon” (p.7). As such, the book’s pillars are not Marx or Hegel or their primary interlocutors, but Georges Sorel, Frantz Fanon, and Enrique Dussel, figures who both engage and resist the dialectic of material and idealist history. In Chapter 1, “Jumpstarting the Class Struggle,” Ciccariello-Maher delves into the work of Sorel, in order to affirm the French philosopher’s intellectual work as a struggle “over the meaning of ... dialectics” (p.28). The choice of Sorel, in some ways problematic because of his antisemitism (though Hegel’s own racism has not prevented him from taking an esteemed place in continental philosophy), strategically allows Ciccariello-Maher to side-step the either/or of the dialectical tradition. Instead, it grounds subsequent discussions of the concepts of being, nation, and people in future chapters in their material conditions of possibility, conditions that are not understood strictly via Marx, Engels or Lenin. Sorel, he suggests, offers a “radically reformulated” (p.24) Marxian dialectics of class struggle because he “introduces a dialectical relationship into the economic ‘base’ itself” (p.31). Having inherited a dialectical tradition that he found limiting, Sorel opens it up by positing that there is no one-to-one position between one’s place in the economic structure and one’s class identity, or between ideology and identity, the latter of which is only evolutionary, rather than foreclosed. It is this “revisionist impulse” (p.43) that, according to Ciccariello-Maher, leads Sorel to privilege the fluidity of social conditions over ideology and dismiss “the inevitability of historical movement”. He writes: “Sorel was acutely aware of the dangers of false universals masquerading as ethical systems” leading either to an “idealized present...or a future harmonious society...” (ibid.). It is thus Sorel’s “skepticism” that Ciccariello-Maher argues is a critical part of a *decolonized* dialectical tradition because it opens

up possibilities for how we understand class itself. It does this by suggesting that while class is a unit of historical analysis, it is simultaneously overdetermined from without and heterogeneous from within in a way that is not fully accounted for nor reconciled within extant political economy. This double gesture with regard to class is where Ciccariello-Maher locates the possibility for a new thinking together of race and nation, with and through class. Sorel, in other words, provides a necessary opening or reformulation of a tradition in such a way that it can finally account for differences that were always constructed as marginal, rather than essential. Sorel, Ciccariello-Maher surmises, “allows for a decolonization of dialectical struggles that draws together combative identities” in order to advance the real possibility of “a move across the ‘colonial difference’” (p.45). The approach to class teased out by Ciccariello-Maher is what we can identify early in the book as the beginning of a decolonial method.

While the chapter on Sorel may feel like a stretch for vulgar Marxism, the chapters on Fanon, which follow his ontological and phenomenological arguments in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), respectively, brilliantly elaborate the latter’s work in and of itself and, as becomes clear in subsequent chapters, poses particular problems for thinking about the commensurability of struggles around class, race, gender, etc. Indeed, Ciccariello-Maher’s is one of the best extant elaborations of Fanonian dialectics and as such is fundamentally didactic. Acknowledging that Sorel and Fanon operate from disparate poles where class is to the former what blackness is to the latter, Ciccariello-Maher suggests that what links their work is violence as a “shared dialectics” (p.49). The first chapter on Fanon, Chapter 2, “Toward a New Dialectics of Race,” focuses on ontological violence and Fanon’s open-ended dialectics and insistence on the need for revolutionary struggle. It is the latter that leads Ciccariello-Maher to spend a great deal of time elaborating Fanon’s master-slave dialectic as a rejection of “racial essentialism” (p.60) and in its distinction from and incommensurability with the Hegelian dialectic of lordship and bondage in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The latter, he reminds us, is the dialectic necessary to the structure of the world, the one from which the entrance of blacks is necessarily always foreclosed. While Ciccariello-Maher’s explanation of the difference and break between Hegelian and Fanonian dialectics is not new—as diaspora

scholars we are well aware of the difference—what is striking is its lucidity. In reading it, one immediately calls to mind “the sunken place” in Jordan Peele’s cinematographic masterpiece, *Get Out* (2017). Ciccariello-Maher’s explanation is the textual equivalent of the film’s depiction of the way in which blacks are trapped in a subdialectical zone of nonbeing, locked out of the dominant account or experience of self-consciousness.

The explanation of Fanon serves a strategic purpose and Fanonian nonbeing becomes the second pillar of the book, the second tier of a method. Moreover, in later chapters, Ciccariello-Maher refuses to sacrifice it to class, nation, or people in a manner that is fundamentally instructive. Here, however, he uses it to think through the position of blackness today. In direct reference to Mike Brown and victims of state-sponsored violence, Ciccariello-Maher perceives the “redundancy of ‘Black violence’” (p.61). In other words, to the extent that blacks (men and women) are perceived as always already violent, especially in their resistance to white violence against them (read MLK and Black Lives Matter), black visibility is always already a violence, a decolonial violence, which is why it occasions black death as a disciplinary measure. He writes: “For those relegated to nonbeing and condemned to invisibility, to even appear is a violent act—because it *is* violent to the structures of the world and because it will inevitably be treated as such” (ibid.). In a clear rejection of the politics of recognition, it is precisely this “illicit” nature of “black appearance” that he says “must sharpen into a weapon.” (p.62). Violence, in short, becomes not just what has been done to blacks to keep them as *infrahumans*, but it is necessary to their eventual eruption into being. Here Ciccariello-Maher echoes what has been said by scholars such as Lewis Gordon, Calvin Warren, or any number that have taken up Fanon. What remains useful, however, is his attempt to have that violence be effective rather than affective, to reinforce it as the point at which ontological blackness engages the rest of the world and therefore cannot be subsumed under racial or class difference. It is this “ontological apartheid” (p.63), which fuels Fanon’s decolonial dialectics of “rupture, diremption, and division” (p.71) that Ciccariello-Maher argues should be approached as a concrete, productive force in “dialectical combat” at “the global level” (p.73). In other words, going forward, class, race, nation, people, etc. cannot mean or be fully comprehended without its inflection with the

violence of nonbeing and the latter should always be engaged as resistance and rupture, not accommodation, transformation, or reconciliation.

Only after this exploration of the ontological Fanon and an affirmation of what is essentially irreconcilable, does Ciccariello-Maher turn to the second chapter on Fanon, Chapter 3, “The Decolonial Nation in Motion”. The chapter can be described as an exploration of the phenomenological aspects of Fanonian dialectics. It shifts the focus from the necessity of metaphysical violence in the preceding chapter to physical violence in Fanon’s work as equally necessary for the political liberation of the people and for the emergence of the decolonial nation. The chapter’s most significant achievement is a definitive rescue of Fanon from charges that his work is both Manichaeic and nothing more than vulgar nationalism. It is a deliberate working through of Fanon’s arguments to suggest that the dialectical motion that drives *Black Skin, White Masks* also exists in *The Wretched of the Earth*, albeit in a different way. To make this argument, Ciccariello-Maher does a dense reading of Fanon with and against a host of European and Caribbean intellectuals, including Hardt and Negri, Sorel, Engels, Dühring, Jacques Roumain, C.L.R. James, and Aimé Césaire. Ciccariello-Maher’s assessment of the Fanonian dialectic as always open-ended, even with regard to concrete resistance, compels him to defend the Manicheism that Fanon is often accused of as a particular *moment* in the dialectic. Ciccariello-Maher argues that what appears to be an absolute division in Fanon between colonizer and colonized is in fact what propels or catalyzes dialectical struggle: “Rather than refuse the Manichaeic division undergirding the colonial system, the colonized *takes hold of* that rupture, and indeed radicalizes it.” (p.80) Without the division, the colonized, he suggests, would not come to the self-knowledge required to resist violently and foster not just the ontological revolution of the preceding chapter, but the “social revolution” in this one. What’s more, this is where Ciccariello-Maher locates what he sees as Fanon’s optimism, and this offers his first, but not last, questioning of the strict Afro-pessimist interpretation of Fanon’s work that has largely taken up the ontological at the expense of the phenomenological Fanon. What the Manicheism—that is not Manicheism—exposes is the fact that there is only symmetry and no “reciprocity” of struggle between colonizer and colonized, and because of this what is therefore

required is “permanent struggle.” The emphasis on the latter is, for Ciccariello-Maher, what critically links Sorelian and Fanonian dialectics: both reject the idea that dialectics move toward resolution, and while one does it with regard to class and the other racialized class, both emphasize that class positions are never reciprocal, though this is largely their overrepresentation.

In Fanon, Ciccariello-Maher finds that it is for the above reason that the nation and blackness, rather than being static, are perpetually moving. Moreover, his rereading of one of Fanon’s most famous quotations emerges as the best example of how Manicheism is dialectical in Fanon: “In the colonies the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is effect: You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.” (quoted on p.86-87) For Ciccariello-Maher, these lines don’t reflect the fixed nature of race and class, but their complex interweaving and the moment in which we must understand that the struggle of the colonizer-colonized is in fact the struggle of the world. It is, in other words, the dialectic that propels the world forward, sitting alongside the Hegelian one. He writes: “If Fanon is here insisting that race matters (richness depends on whiteness), he is also simultaneously insisting on an antiessentialist understanding of race as codetermined by class (whiteness depends on richness) and further complicated by the global geography of the ‘elsewhere’.” (p.87) This dialectic between race and class is what also leads Ciccariello-Maher to argue that within the decolonial nation, there is always already a struggle, hence the nation as incomplete as origin or end. The “interminable dialectics within the nation, between mass and leadership” (p.95), exists because the national bourgeoisie has “no dialectical purpose” and because of their historic configuration, represent the point at which the colonial struggle emerges again as part of the global class struggle. The limitations of the national bourgeoisie exist in the fact that it needs to maintain a particular position with regard to class and hence proceeds to dialectical closure while the masses, whose position is not reconcilable, necessarily resist, leading to persistent openness. This dialectical undercurrent is what sits at the heart of the colonizer-colonized struggle to effect a layering of dialectical struggles, rather than the resolution of one as the term in the dialectic of the other. The always already of the class division together with the “subontological” zone of

nonbeing occupied by the colonized is what leads Ciccariello-Maher to frame Fanon's not just as a radical dialectics, but, through its Manicheanism, as a "dialectics of rupture" (p.97) that is necessarily world historical and within which the nation and the human are all endlessly differed and deferred. In other words, the possibility of a radical dialectics lies in precisely the fact that the nonbeing of the ontological Fanon is critical to the being-in-struggle of the phenomenological Fanon. Finally, Ciccariello-Maher suggests, this emphasis on class-race, rather than just class alone or race alone, is where Fanon goes further even than Sorel, displacing the latter at the global level. Rather than approach class and race as "modalities" (to reference Paul Gilroy [1987]), Ciccariello-Maher's focus on decolonization compels him to reject the universality of race for the particularity of *nonbeing* in its engagement *with* class. His method here thus becomes broadly useful for understanding why, for instance, civil rights and other such legislation fails to truly liberate blacks to the extent that they reproduce race as class, rather than the decolonial violence of nonbeing. Moreover, his insistence seems to be that in our critical methodologies, we need to begin to foreground the latter violence, rather than the former structure.

The fourth chapter, "Latin American Dialectics and the Other," shifts from the focus on the nation in the preceding chapter to the people, and from colonial Africa to postcolonial Latin America. Its principal aim is to demonstrate how the Argentinian philosopher, historian, and founder of Latin American Philosophy of Liberation, Enrique Dussel, constructs a concept of the people through the play of "analectics" and dialectics. It is through Dussel's work that Fanon re-emerges and is placed in dialogue with Latin American decolonial thinkers, such as the Peruvian intellectual José Carlos Mariátegui. For Ciccariello-Maher, Fanon and Dussel decolonize Hegel and Emmanuel Levinas, respectively, to offer a more complex image of the nation and the people. They do this by adding a dimension of specificity to what have largely been conceived of as abstract and/or Western concepts, and in so doing ground abstract dialectical tension in concrete historical movement and global coloniality. But the yoking of Fanon and Dussel—both of whom share the same "conceptual and political ground" as scholar-activists (p.107)—in the chapter achieves much more. It is here that the book truly becomes instructive for those of us

who experience and write about oppressions from within different fields of situatedness, what Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard (2014) would call “grounded normativity.”

In elucidating the tension between nonbeing (the dialectical in Fanon) and exteriority (the analectical in Dussel), Ciccariello-Maher’s greatest strength is in *not* foreclosing Fanonian difference. He does so by directly acknowledging both the “complicity of ontology with coloniality” (p.109) and the “risk of erasing the particularity of exteriority” (p.119). Reading Dussel, he finds the people are a “radical” and “dynamic” tension that never resolves into a single concrete identity, and, in so doing, remains a play of individuals that while grounded in the exteriority of the colonial encounter and its aftermaths, is always contradictory. The contradiction is where Ciccariello-Maher locates the different and even more abject positions with regard to non-being. Despite being foundational to Fanonian dialectics, these positions aren’t explored even in Coulthard’s excellent application of Fanon in *Red Skin, White Masks* and it is around this tension that we find the breaks and potential points of linkage among Afro-pessimism, the conceptual ground of black fungibility, and indigeneity. Coulthard, like many scholars, applies Fanon but leaves aside the issue of black non-being, around which *Black Skin, White Masks* is formulated. In his and other works, black exteriority as posed in Fanon is unthinkable and remains marginal to other social struggles, thus reinstating the break between, for instance, blackness and indigeneity. In Ciccariello-Maher’s work, however, the gap becomes a productive and elaborative tension, allowing him to think together very different colonially derived social contexts, without sacrificing particularity. With at least four panels devoted to the above impasse at the annual meeting of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association in May 2018, the method Ciccariello-Maher offers is both timely and productive.

The fifth chapter, “Venezuela’s Combative Dialectics,” turns its attention to the subject of Ciccariello-Maher’s earlier work, Venezuela and its former president Hugo Chávez. In particular, Ciccariello-Maher explores the social movement and ideology of Chavismo in order to complete the arc of the work from class (Sorel) to being (Fanon) to nation (Fanon) and the people (Dussel), by grounding the latter in the historically specific moment of its constitution in early 21st century Venezuelan and international politics. In so doing, he directly pushes back

against concepts of the people, such as Hardt and Negri's (2000, 2004) "multitude", which he sees as an extension of the kind of universal abstraction of the dialectical tension that constitutes itself as a world-historical force, with non-being and coloniality securely at its margins. Thus, the multitude is, for Ciccariello-Maher, more Hobbesian than not, contrary to the authors own claims, and is decidedly Eurocentric in its maintenance of the colonial difference as a kind of constitutive exteriority. Ciccariello-Maher goes so far as to suggest that their idea of the nation and people are "undialectical" and offers in its place a concept of the people as more than just tension. Here, Ciccariello-Maher squarely enters into some of the most decidedly thorny terrain of the work, exchanging the nation for a concept of the people that is both dialectical and analectical, which, after Dussel, he frames as the "affirmation of exteriority" within the dialectic itself (p.114). In other words, through readings that take us through Ernesto Laclau, Levinas and a host of Latin Americanists like Mariátegui and Rómulo Betancourt, among others, he brings into tense and sustained exchange Fanonian non-being *and* Dusselian exteriority in an analysis of Chavismo. Ciccariello-Maher thereby moves away from a focus on Chavez as an orienting point or center of political organization in order to foreground the people and identities within that don't simply stem from Chávez. Chavismo is here read as a "tense" political, rather than blindly ideological, unit(y) that is emergent both diachronically and synchronically, in keeping with, respectively, past historical movements, such as Bolivarian revolutionary struggle, and current tensions that are both local and global. Under Ciccariello-Maher's handling, Chávez emerges less as the resolution of tensions that would ostensibly subordinate Indigenous, racial, gender, sexual, and other differences to class position, and more as a conduit for a dynamic unfolding of the people that "reflects a Sorelian commitment to subjectively established combat; a Fanonian attentiveness to struggle that is 'grounded in temporality', granting weight to dialectical momentum; and a Dusselian insistence on a politics that expands toward exteriority, in which present struggles by a part gesture toward a future whole that is both enlarged and radically reconfigured" (p.145).

The concluding chapter, "Spirals," turns to Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois, who is actually engaged throughout. "Spirals" reinforces the book's dual focus on dialectics without

origin and the need to maintain rather than disappear the line between class and decolonial struggle. It is an argument for Douglass's work as containing a complete, and even more nuanced expression of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, despite his having not read Hegel, so that, again, decolonial dialectics exist as a structural parallel, rather than an eventful corollary. More importantly, the emphasis on Du Bois allows Ciccariello-Maher to institute decolonial dialectics as fundamentally different because they are without origin, having been doubly positioned by and within interiority and exteriority, and constituted by different conditions of possibility rather than overdetermined by individual thinkers. It is through Douglass that Ciccariello-Maher reinforces what the book has been arguing for, a deeper account of the "global and historical complicity of race and class" (p.160), something that is entirely left out of, for instance, Chibber's analysis. This strategic delinking and tense re-engagement of race and class allows Ciccariello-Maher to move beyond the dominant readings of history in terms of either positive or negative dialectics. It also takes him beyond the fetters such readings place on both our ability to see contingency in what seem to be different world-historical events and on the ability for struggles, such as black and Indigenous, or class, to be articulated together. In Ciccariello-Maher's work, a decolonized dialectics has no less than a world-historical function. Additionally, just as he resists dialectical closure throughout the book, his desire to end the book "prior to where I began" (p.153) leads Ciccariello-Maher to offer a tense, nihilistic optimism by suggesting that the end of history is nothing more than the closure of a dialectical process that folded in on itself and exists now only as tension *within* the dialectical and analectical processes of those on the margins who rightly push not for the end of history, not for closure, but for violence: for the end of Man, and "the end of the world" of Man (p.170).

Decolonizing Dialectics suggests that we should step out of the lethargic myopia of discourse at the end of history because dialectics after the end of history is not counter-discourse but, after Fanon, a necessary violence. Yet, while the book functions as a much-needed method for scholars, one that cuts across the modes of coloniality and empire that dominate the modern world, it leaves open questions that, if pursued, might themselves lead to new ruptures. These include the following: if we return to black women's roles in anticolonial struggle, how do they

reconfigure positions of exteriority and non-being? Where and how are alternative genders constructed by non-being or exteriority, neither or both? What is the relationship of African identity to blackness as non-being? Where are degrees of non-being that are not abject blackness positioned in relation to exteriority and class? The often dense, close readings that comprise the book might for some yield little in the way of new knowledge about Fanon, Dussel, or Du Bois individually, but as a whole, the book effectively offers a method for current scholarship on race, class, and coloniality that finally gets us out of our “postcolonial melancholia” (to reference Gilroy [2006] again).

Ciccariello-Maher is unapologetic about how dialectics matter and is committed to showing how in fact dialectical struggle impacts and shapes our current political moment. That the Arab Spring, for instance, has been followed by Black Lives Matter, #NoDAPL, Brexit, Trump, and the election of far-right candidates across the globe, and that these have also been succeeded by a mass women’s movement and student movement in the U.S., suggests that he is indeed right in seeing the world in terms of the interminable dialectical struggle of being and of non-being, of interiority and exteriority. *Decolonizing Dialectics*’ timeliness lies in the fact that it gives us an approach to these tensions as academics, which exploits their decolonial potential, and affirms, after and through Fanon, their necessary violence, rather than just settle for reciprocity, closure, or another book on dialectics.

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