OURS IS A NEWLY DIALECTICAL AGE, the much-touted teleological resolution of the "end of history" having collapsed like the myth that it always was into fragmentation, division, and dynamic oppositions, new struggles erupting over old questions. For too long, however, *dialectics* has not served to denote such moments of combative division that give its name, but instead the opposite: a harmonious closure often announced but rarely experienced. For this, Hegel bears as much responsibility as anyone: driven by a profound anxiety toward rupture and "intense longing" for unity, Hegel's dialectical vision would enable conservative resolutions even as it opened radical possibilities.¹

It is perhaps little surprise, then, that the most famous recent attempt to recruit Hegel for the task of declaring history over—Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*—took much the same form as Hegel's own preemptive dialectical closure nearly two centuries prior, albeit in a more transparently conservative way. Blind to the internal tensions of globalizing capital, Fukuyama even more than Hegel fell back on a faith in the impossible: the resolution of the utterly contradictory, the reconciliation of humanity with its opposite, through the same vehicle: civil society.² Today, more than two decades after the banner of civil society was hoisted to topple the Soviet Union and usher in a temporarily unipolar neoliberal world, that banner now dangles in tatters, its internal tensions bared and its complicities with power ever more apparent—the vehicle of choice for removing intransigent regimes from Yugoslavia to Haiti, Ukraine, and Venezuela.³
By contrast, new struggles are emerging, new ruptures throwing forth
new and renewed identities that deepen contradictions and press toward
different possible futures. I do not refer to what for years was offered to
disprove liberal optimism—namely, the resurgence of political Islam—
although this too is a clear enough indication that history has yet to reach
its terminus. I refer instead primarily to those struggles that have surged
forth in opposition to the neoliberal onslaught and which pose the possi-
bility of a postneoliberal world: the Latin American “pink tide” (especially
in its darker red variants), a veritable global wave of riots and rebellions
returning like the repressed to the heart of the Old World (Paris, London),
and more recently the broad upsurge comprising the Arab Spring, the
Spanish indignados, and the Occupy Movement. New identities, new strug-
gles, and new forms of sociability, the novelty of each never expressed in
absolute terms, but instead as an occasionally painful process of strategic
and tactical refinement whose defeats and reversals are as pronounced as
its victories and advances.

Not surprisingly, this newly combative moment has been accompanied
by and intertwined as both cause and effect with a rebirth of dialectical
thought. Whether in recent attempts to rethink the Hegelian legacy, to
renovate the Marxist and communist tradition, or to mobilize against the
current political and economic crises racking the globe, the question of
dialectics—the dynamic movement of conflictive oppositions—is once
again firmly on the table. In this process, the dialectical questions par
excellence—what to preserve and what to discard, how to move forward
without reproducing the errors of the past—are re-posed with height-
ened urgency. But in the context of struggles that are powerfully global,
at the intersection of the inverse but complicit dynamics of outsourcing
and exodus-migration, white supremacist containment and suburban re-
bellion, we cannot escape the historically fraught relationship between
dialectics and decolonization, one long characterized by mutual suspicion.

On the one hand, while Hegel and especially Karl Marx have long served
as go-to sources for struggles emerging from the global periphery, these
same authors have been viewed with skepticism due to their shared Euro-
centrism and the linear, progressive, determinist, and teleological elements
of their approaches. As a result, most postcolonial theory has “eluded en-
gagement with... the reworking of dialectical thinking.” Viewed from
the opposite direction, however, this postcolonial suspicion is not with-
out reason, since despite the undeniable resources that Hegel and Marx
furnished for later decolonial thought, many contemporary neodialec-
ticians have done little to alleviate the concerns of their would-be decol-
lonial allies. Reacting to poststructuralist and postcolonial critiques of
the universal, thinkers from Slavoj Žižek to Alain Badiou have effectively
bent the stick in the opposite direction, occasionally to a troubling degree.
Where Badiou has assailed an “ethics of difference” that is complicit with
capitalist multiculturalism, his alternative is the unalloyed universalism
of a “generic humanity” that is fundamentally “indifferent to differences.”
Žižek, with a characteristic zeal for the provocative, has gone even further
in urging the Left to openly embrace Eurocentrism. But as a boomerang
effect of the poststructural politics of difference, much is missed in this
precipitous return swing toward the universal.

Troubling Unity

Despite the palpable divisions increasingly embraced in theory and incar-
nated in practice, political logics of the present remain curiously trained
on unity. In a maneuver that Michel Foucault describes as recentering and
even recolonization, unitary logics stalk political oppositions, seeking to
deactivate unruly movements in the name of power and sovereignty. Po-
itical leaders from Right to Left, Republicans and Democrats alike, ma-
neuver and jockey less over substantive differences than over who can claim
the mantle of speaking for everyone and whose unity is therefore prefer-
able. Thus we unify against our enemies under Barack Obama as we did
under George W. Bush, with the sole proviso that Afghanistan is a “good
war” while Iraq was a “bad war,” a merely qualitative metric for determin-
ing who “our” absolute enemy is.

So too in domestic affairs, where the question is not “what price unity?”
but instead, “who is the us that is unified?” Obama’s famous 2008 “race
speech” was accordingly titled “A More Perfect Union,” but four years later
his cynical pretensions shone through when he admitted that “the nature of
this office is also to tell a story that gives them a sense of unity and purpose
and optimism.” Here Hegelian themes are clearly on display: totality (we are
unified), teleology (we have a purpose), and the promise of progress (we
are optimistic). The inescapability of this logic of unity was clear as day just
two months later when Mitt Romney violated this cardinal rule in a leaked
video, scornfully dismissing the laziness of the 47 percent. Having acciden-
tally proven his unsuitability for “the nature of this office,” Romney paid the
price for speaking the inverted truth of a class warfare he rejected in public.

The differences between the two candidates would prove more rhe-
torical than substantive as a result: Obama’s watered-down immigration
reform is a drop in the bucket compared with record deportations; in terms of human rights abuses abroad, one unnamed government official spoke of “no change at all . . . an almost seamless transition from Bush to Obama”; Obama’s much-touted Affordable Care Act has left the private insurance sector firmly in the driver’s seat; and the long-promised integration of Black Americans into this unified nation has been little more than window dressing. Rather than the crowning resolution of struggles past, Obama’s election has instead represented, as Glen Ford presciently predicted, “the antithesis of Black Power”—a dialectical identity if ever there was one—its deactivation and incorporation into the status quo ante.

If we had any reason to doubt this diagnosis in an age of mass incarceration and resurgent white fascism, then the names turned hashtags Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Tamir Rice, CeCe McDonald, Sandra Bland, and Mike Brown—among thousands of others—serve as a painful reminder. The nation remains fundamentally unchanged, albeit adorned with fewer Confederate flags. But even the most cynical campaign rhetoric and even the emptiest promises can produce social blowback: if theorists of revolutionary change have long emphasized how rising and frustrated expectations can spark social upheaval, we find this confirmed in the militant resistance that broke out at the dawn of the age of Obama and has only escalated in the falling dusk of his promised hope and change, in those local names turned national symbols: Ferguson and Baltimore. And lest we dismiss the unitary rhetoric of sovereignty as simply a ruse, reducing it to the disingenuousness of political power, such logics permeate far more deeply, cutting into and across oppositional movements and discourses themselves, disarming movements from within and preparing them for reincorporation into the governing apparatus.

Here, the Occupy Movement provides a dire warning. While Occupy gained initial traction as a clarion call for social equality by reposing class conflict in the now-famous ratio of the wealthiest 1 percent against the remaining 99 percent, swirling immediately in and around the occupied camps was the sharp interrogation of this ratio, not from advocates of unity, but from those posing division in different terms. Those criticizing the slogan of the 99 percent from a class perspective rightly worried that this ratio displaced hostility from capitalist exploiters to the recently popularized category of the “super-rich,” usually associated with high finance. Inversely, others argued that there was little practical use for a category in which one could still earn over $300,000 annually and technically be a member of the “99 percent”: in this view, demonizing the super-rich simply acquitted the
just plain rich of their exploitative role. Others shunned a strictly economic approach entirely, insisting that the fault lines racking U.S. society have more to do with anti-Black racism, colonization (whose relation to calls to “occupy” is tense at best), or gender. Ultimately, the most militant of occupations—in Oakland, California—divided into two wings known as “Occupy Oakland” and “Decolonize Oakland,” although the question of whether this particular division of one into two was a dialectical one, remains open.\(^\text{10}\)

Those who defended the idea of the 99 percent, and especially those who enforced it in practice in the Occupy encampments, testified to both the lure of unity and its dangers. For many, the strength of the slogan of the 99 percent was its inclusivity, the laudable aspiration to gather rather than disperse our forces. But by asymptotically approaching the inclusion of everyone, we run the risk of sliding into far more treacherous territory, moving from rupture, division, and opposition toward the aspirational recasting of a near-total unity. If anything, this is the most ideological gesture of all, one that seeks to reconcile rupture with its opposite, taking refuge in the comforting idea that we are all in this together rather than engaging in risky solidarity against. While dangerous in its own right, this slide toward unitary logic also enacted-while-concealing concrete exclusions as well: critics were tarred as “divisive,” as a mortal threat to the unity of the 99 percent, and this label was reserved especially for those who sought to establish people of color or women’s caucuses within the camps.

In banishing difference, this homogeneous universalism jealously reproduced the unity it had once claimed to oppose, and demands for internal unity proved complicit with the even more dangerous openness that some camps demonstrated toward the power structure itself: welcoming local mayors and police into the warm embrace of the 99 percent all the while silencing internal dissidents. In many places, Occupy thereby became a safe space for those already safe, refusing to even exclude white supremacists, anti-immigrant activists, and Ron Paul supporters, while embattled radicals drifted away. It was only a matter of time before Occupy candidates began to make electoral bids, and large sectors of the movement were re-incorporated into the same power structure it had sought to oppose. As I write this, moreover, it is clear that such threats were not limited to Occupy: observe the ease with which political opportunists and foundation funders are currently working to recolonize the oppositional energy of the Black Lives Matter movement by exploiting the political naiveté of some of its leaders—we can only hope that the explosiveness of Ferguson and Baltimore will not be bought off so cheaply.
Beyond revealing the seductions of unity, such dynamics point toward the contested nature of the identities in question and tenacious debates about the relationship between race, class, nation, and gender.¹¹ How to negotiate these dynamics, these microdialectics that cut into and across oppositional movements themselves, while always keeping a wary eye toward that dangerous lure that Cristina Beltrán calls “the trouble with unity”?¹² Whether in the theoretical chasm between Žižek’s universalism and postcolonial theory or the on-the-ground clash between “Decolonize” and “Occupy,” I argue that much is neglected in between. It is this vast and generative space—one constituted by the unavoidable judgment of where and when to draw hard lines, divide unities, and press oppositions—that I hope to probe in this book, with the following questions in mind.

First, against those postcolonial thinkers who discard dialectics out of hand, is it possible to subject the dialectical tradition to its own decolonizing Aufhebung, transcending its limitations by preserving what is useful and shedding what is not? Second, and inversely, is there a dialectical understanding capable of accommodating the continuing project of decolonization, and the questions of race and nation that this process inevitably confronts, or is the historical baggage of dialectical thought simply too heavy to be worth the trouble? My response to both lies in the affirmative: just as any attempt to systematically grasp the conflicts and identities that structure our world requires that we rupture the boundaries of European thought, we cannot grasp the parameters of decolonization as a profound and ongoing process without recourse to some modified understanding of that dynamic and combative motion that many give the name “dialectics.”

Decolonizing Dialectics

In this book, I approach the task of decolonizing dialectics by excavating a largely subterranean current of thought, what I call a counterdiscourse, that I argue constitutes a radicalization of the dialectical tradition while also opening outward toward its decolonization. This is a dialectical counterdiscourse that, by foregrounding rupture and shunning the lure of unity, makes its home in the center of the dialectic and revels in the spirit of combat, the indeterminacies of political identities slamming against one another, transforming themselves and their worlds unpredictably in the process. This is a dialectical counterdiscourse that, by grasping the momentary hardening of group identities, grants weight to a separatist moment in dialectics—at the expense of premature reconciliation—but does so without succumbing to a hermetically essentialist separatism, be it of class,
race, nation, or otherwise. Identities are forged in struggle, and there too are they reforged. This is a dialectical counterdiscourse that, as a result, tosses off many of the shackles of a conservative dialectical tradition that traffics under the phrase, only dubiously attributable to Hegel: “the real is rational.” In confronting the antidialectical immobility of false universals that portray the present as complete, the thinkers considered here resist all teleology, determinism, linearity, refuse all comforting promises of inherent progress, and defer all premature declarations that history has indeed reached its conclusion. Their horizon remains a horizon.

I begin with the turn-of-the-century French syndicalist Georges Sorel to distill the basic contours of a radicalized dialectic of European class struggle. Confronting the false promise of social unity that had deactivated the class struggle, Sorel concluded that working-class conditions (class-in-itself) were no guarantee of an oppositional working-class identity (class-for-itself) and that the latter must be actively constructed and subjectively projected in an openly combative struggle. In part through Sorel’s peculiar attentiveness to the importance of ideology—and thereby the centrality of class identity—he is able to glimpse at a surprisingly early moment the contours of a broad Marxist dialectics of history stripped of all determinism and teleology, in which the identitarian intervention of the working class serves as the fundamental but not invincible motor force. Despite, or better put, as a result of his intransigent class-centrism—one that foregrounds ideology, identity, and active intervention—Sorel’s immanent critique of European Marxism provides not the origin of decolonized dialectics, but a radically combative baseline that is open to subsequent decolonization.

I then turn to the Martinican-born and French-trained psychiatrist turned Algerian revolutionary Frantz Fanon, who serves as a bridge between Europe and the colonies and thereby from a European to a more openly decolonial dialectics. Not unaware of Sorel’s work, Fanon nevertheless took an ostensibly different approach, engaging race (rather than class) in the European context and doing so through a critical engagement with the Hegelian master-slave dialectic (rather than the Marxist dialectic of class struggle). Surface differences conceal substantive similarities, however: where Sorel saw a dialectics frozen by the ideology of unity, Fanon saw one short-circuited by white supremacy, in which the basis for reciprocity—which Hegel took for granted—did not yet exist. Like Sorel, he advocated subjective, identitarian struggle to jumpstart dialectical motion, but by injecting subontological racial difference into Hegel’s formulation, he also
crucially "decolonized" the master-slave dialectic itself. After shifting to the revolutionary Algerian context, Fanon confronted a similar context, albeit one characterized not by frozen unity, but by the concealed opposition that he famously diagnosed as Manichaean. In response, he would project this radicalized dialectic onto the global scale, posing a broad opposition between the decolonial nation as a complex, shifting, and dialectical entity and those (neo)colonial forces intent on freezing its motion both from within and from without.

Finally, I turn to the exiled Argentine philosopher of liberation Enrique Dussel Ambrosini, who poses what would appear to be a direct challenge to both the coherence of this counterdiscourse and to the possibility of a decolonized dialectics more generally. Influenced by Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of alterity, Dussel is sharply critical of dialectics and instead embraces what he calls an _analectics_ rooted in the embrace of the Other as exteriority. However, as I show, Dussel's break with dialectics is far from complete, and rather than refuting a decolonized dialectics, his insistence on incorporating the category of exteriority into a dialectics of national and popular identity provides an essential ingredient for my own project that—through a sort of productive parallax—is visible in Fanon's work as well.

It is this dynamic fusion of internal oppositions and decolonial appeal to excluded exteriorities that, I then argue, we see playing out in the combative dialectics and multiple subdialectics swirling around and coalescing in Venezuela's "Bolivarian Revolution." In the last chapter, I test the traction of this decolonized dialectical approach through a reading of the dynamic movement of "the people" (el _pueblo_) in a moment still shaped by the combative specter of the late president Hugo Chávez. While some Eurocentric critics dismiss popular identity as inherently unitary and homogenizing, I show how its contextual function in Venezuela—and much of Latin America—tends instead to be combative and divisive. The dynamic movement of the Venezuelan people in recent years has done more than simply draw together different sectors in struggle; it has marked for many the overcoming of ontological exclusions discernible only through a decolonized dialectical lens, their entrance into being itself.

A word on terminology and categories: the thinkers that I draw together here write in markedly different registers. Thus Sorel, a more unabashedly political and practical thinker, speaks scornfully of unity and "social harmony." Fanon, who oscillates between political and ontological registers, takes aim instead at false universals, whether at the foundation of Hegel's own system or in the politics of formal emancipation. In Dussel, finally,
the philosophical register takes center stage with his frontal critique of "totality," which he nevertheless translates into the categories of coloniza-
tion and exclusion. To smooth such terminological disjunctions, I use the
language of the authors themselves, while anchoring the discussion con-
ceptually to Martin Jay's typology of the category of totality: specifically,
the distinction between descriptive and normative totalities, as well as
the more powerful conceptions of expressive totality (history as the uni-
ified expression of a single principle) and longitudinal totality (a temporal
unity in which that singular history moves progressively forward).15

Why Dialectics?

Each of the thinkers considered here is a sharp critic of the dialectical
tradition in its different manifestations. Søren goes so far as to denounce
dialectics as illusory, Fanon aims his sharpest theoretical barbs at Hegel's
dialectic of recognition, and Dussel turns to exteriority against what he
reads—transposing concepts with geopolitics—as a sort of dialectical
imperialism. Each rejects elements so common to dialectical thinking as to be
considered by some its essential ingredients: teleology, determinism, pro-
gress, class-centrism, and two-sidedness, among others. If dialectics—or
better, "the dialectic"—is necessarily totalizing, deterministic, or teleologi-
cal, one could argue that the thinkers in question here move, each in their
own way, and perhaps without knowing it, irreversibly beyond anything
that could be called properly dialectical. More precisely, one might argue that
what passes for dialectics in this book, especially a decolonized dialectics
that foregrounds the category of subontological difference and exteriority,
has crossed the crucial Hegelian threshold that divides difference (an inter-
nal relationship) from diversity (the indifferent difference of a purely exter-
nal relation).16 Without the ties that bind opposing elements by necessity
to one another—without, in other words, the unified ground of totality to
grant meaning to oppositions—nothing remains but unrelated multiplicity.

Why then attempt to unite such a motley band of theoretical heretics
under the banner of dialectics in the first place? Is it not fairer and safer
to circumvent thorny philological and Marxological debates by simply opt-
ing out? While tempting in its simplicity, I believe that to evade dialectics
entirely would be a cop-out, for at least three reasons: two theoretical rea-
sons that point, from inverse directions and at opposite extremes, toward
the danger of bad dialectics on the one hand and bad multiplicity on the
other. These two theoretical reasons then ground the potentially too-
obvious practical argument for a dialectical approach that nevertheless, in
its simplicity, conceals its own theoretical rationale: that the thinkers in question considered themselves to be doing the same.

First, to surrender the name dialectics would be to hand dialectical thinking over to its more conservative proponents, as a phenomenon oriented toward internal closure or centered too stringently on the internal nature of oppositions. If we hold too tightly to what binds the two sides to one another in a predetermined logic, we foreclose on a radicalized dialectics by succumbing to what Fredric Jameson describes as "the possibility that difference might vanish altogether in some premature identity." 17 This threat should not be a surprise, since the question of unity constitutes a fundamental tension and perennial temptation for even the inaugurators of the tradition. Whether it be Hegel's own anxieties toward dialectical rupture and desire to theorize systematic reunification, or Marx's posing of a less systematic but still reconciled logic and end of history, master dialecticians past were not immune to those elements so scrutinized in the past century: teleology, determinism, linearity, progressivism, and the lure of totality.

This is not and cannot be a book about Hegel or Marx however—about those who draw them together or oppose them—for space limitations, for the interminable debates this would provoke, and above all because we must set such questions aside if we are ever going to get where we are going. What can and must be said is that the powerful ambivalence both Hegel and Marx display toward unity bespeaks radical kernels of possibility at the very least, kernels that the thinkers discussed in this book seize upon, transform, and exploit in more unashamedly combative directions. 18 This is not to suggest that there have been no previous efforts to decolonize the dialectical tradition, and much less to strip that tradition of its more conservative residues. 19 Suffice it to say, however, many attempts to liberate the dialectical tradition from such fetters have ended up inadvertently reproducing elements of the same, with even the best examples showing just how far epistemic decolonization still has to go. 20

My approach, and that of the thinkers—not to mention the political processes and movements discussed here—will be more directly trained on the dual task of radically rethinking dialectics in a manner faithful to the combative dialectical spirit and decolonizing dialectical thought in the process, insisting all the way that this ostensibly dual task is in fact but a single one. If radicalizing dialectics to the very point of incommensurability runs the risk of moving beyond dialectics entirely, it has the virtue of bringing into the dialectical purview oppositions that are too often obscured. If radicalizing dialectics means attempting to strip away all tele-
ology, decolonizing dialectics underscores how the telos of Hegelian and Marxian conceptions of history emerges from a particular location (Europe), and assumes forms of dialectical resolution specific to it (Sittlichkeit through civil society for Hegel, the resolution of the industrial proletariat-bourgeoisie class opposition for Marx).

If a radicalized dialectics resists the idea that the dialectic moves inexorably and deterministically according to its own internal oppositions, a decolonized dialectics recognizes both the historical source of that motion outside Europe in the colonies as well as the brutal reality that for colonial subjects, history often seems to move backward rather than forward, if it moves at all. If a radicalized dialectics questions the fixed linearity of dialectical movement and recognizes the subjective capacity to set relations into motion and change course, a decolonized dialectics sets out from the historical experience of those who have been instructed to either catch up with Europe by completing the necessary “stages” or to await “objective conditions” that are possible only under a full-fledged capitalism.

Although it is possible to radicalize dialectics without decolonizing, as Sorel does, I argue that it is not possible 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. To the extent that we refuse this straitjacketed view of a dialectical difference that resists or subsumes diversity—foregrounding instead division, rupture, and dynamic opposition—we will always be confronted with a subversive and unpredictable remainder that, as we move toward decolonization, gains a distinct valence in what Fanon calls “nonbeing” and Dussel calls “exteriority,” that which lies beyond the realm of division and which by appearing makes a more profound rupture manifest. And to the extent that the turn toward this remainder pulls us from internal to external difference, our dialectics will lose all the comforts of predictable motion or inevitable progress.

Second, if we do not put up a fight for the name dialectics, we risk abandoning the field of dynamic oppositions—especially those macro-oppositions that cut across society and globe—to the many theories of multiplicity so prevalent today, theories that would see us willfully neglect or deny the broad swing of motion such oppositions often entail. In what follows, I resist this danger not only by reclaiming dialectics, but also—simultaneously and from the opposite direction—by reclaiming Foucault’s conception of
counterdiscourse as itself dialectical, thereby robbing uncritical theories of multiplicity of a caricatured Foucault reducible to the micropolitical. It was against such bad multiplicities—and that of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in particular—that Hegel sought to fold diversity immediately into dialectical opposition, and while mindful of this concern, I hope to instead slow this folding, to sit with and inhabit the category of diversity and the external relation it poses as a key to decolonizing Hegel himself.

Third: it is between these two reasons—bad dialectics on the one hand and bad multiplicity on the other—that we can then walk the practical line set out by the thinkers considered here, not to mention an entire trajectory of decolonial organic intellectuals. In other words, this is a dialectical project in part because the thinkers involved took the dialectical tradition—however critically understood—as a central point of reference. These are thinkers who saw Hegel, Marx, or both as powerful and necessary interlocutors, and in this they were not alone: for more than a century, for better or for worse, the dialectical tradition has served as a go-to weapon in the struggle for not only class liberation but also—all ambiguities and tensions aside—for racial and national liberation.

These ambiguities and tensions are not to be set aside entirely, however, but are instead a central part of the story. An entire litany of radical and decolonial thinkers—George Padmore, Richard Wright, and Aimé Césaire, to name only a few—were even members of official communist parties before breaking with those parties precisely amid sharp debates over race and colonialism. These are thinkers who found in Hegel and Marx values of autonomous selfhood and liberation, tools to diagnose and critique global capitalism, methods that began—as they knew they should—not from negotiation but from struggle, and weapons to sharpen against the “slavery and social death” left in the wake of colonization.

But these are also thinkers who often found Hegel and Marx unable, and their political heirs unwilling, to grapple seriously with the legacy of actual slavery. Once we add those such as Frederick Douglass, who as I will argue in the conclusion puts forth a decolonized dialectics without having read either, it becomes clear that to argue, as Timothy Brennan does, that “the parentage of the postcolonial is, ultimately, a communist one,” is misleading at best, and furthermore evades entirely the central tension posed here. Rather than skirt the questions that this tension raises on both sides—and losing in the process either the importance of communism for decolonization or its failings, why so many were members
but also why they left—my goal here is to confront the tension head on as one to be grappled with.

Which is another way of saying that we must walk in theory the same fine line that decolonial militants have often walked in practice: neither rejecting nor uncritically embracing the dialectical tradition, but instead attempting to rescue a theory of dynamic oppositions from being recolonized by logics of unity or dispersed into meaningless multiplicity. These are thinkers who, while stubborn in their insistence on the rupture of the existing order, are simultaneously and for the same reason deeply hostile to the recuperation of dialectics into unitary logics. As a result, the radicalized dialectical approach they produce, with its combative oppositions and refusal to see divisions subsumed into the whole, is arguably more faithful to the dialectical spirit than even some who gave the approach its name. Viewed this way, the thinkers considered here, as a result of their liminal position that straddles the very border of dialectical thought, might just be the best defenders of any dialectics worth its salt.

Here again, Jameson is productive for his nuanced mapping of the terrain to be traversed between the uncritical unity of conservative dialectics and the uncritical multiplicity of deconstructive temptations, between which lay the terrain of a radicalized dialectics:

the dialectic moves jerkily from moment to moment like a slide show, where deconstruction dizzily fast-forwards . . . both work to bring up into the light the structural incoherences of the “idea” or conceptual “positions” or interpretations which are their object of critique. But where the dialectic pauses, waiting for the new “dialectical” solution to freeze over in its turn and become an idea or an ideology to which the dialectic can again be “applied” . . . deconstruction races forward . . . devour[ing] its own tail, and thus itself in the process. One of the outcomes thus devoured and unraveled is of course the dialectic itself, which paused too long, and became an ideology in its own right, yet another object of deconstruction.25

It is in this generative space between the stalled hesitancy of a dialectic that waits too long and the ravenous appetite of a deconstruction that, in the absence of sustenance, is content to feed on itself, that my project also moves.

In lieu of offering a preemptive definition of dialectics that might violate the spirit of the term, I begin provisionally from Jameson’s own methodological insistence that “any opposition can be the starting point for a
dialectic in its own right,” allowing a proliferation of local dialectics and dynamic oppositions, and I follow him in generally shunning the definite article denoting “the” dialectic. However, my approach is different in two ways: first, I trail slightly closer to deconstruction in the degree to which contingency, indeterminacy, and an open hostility to totality imbue the multiple and local dialectics of the thinkers considered here. Furthermore, I move toward a dialectics understood above all as a practice, or what C. L. R. James aspired to do in his Notes on Dialectics: “not explanations of the dialectic but directly the dialectic itself.” The thinkers considered here are more organic intellectuals than world-historical philosophers looking down with a bird’s-eye-view from above, thinkers who do theory on the basis of actors pressing the dialectic forward themselves through collective solidarities and combat. If this sounds like a strange way to speak of dialectics, this is precisely because the closer we trail toward a conservative dialectics, the less often we hear of one acting dialectically or engaging in dialectical struggle. In this caricatured view—certainly more Hegel than Marx, and a conservative Hegel at that—the dialectic (and here it is almost always the) is something that happens to us and acts upon us, in which we are enmeshed whether we know it or not, unconsciously doing the grand work of history.

The thinkers considered here are doing something different, and to approach dialectics as practice helps to partially allay the dangerous flights that have characterized some previous attempts to think dialectics beyond its conservative forms: to take refuge in paradox or incommensurability in which there is no motion but the (not inconsequential) whirring of the philosopher’s mental gears. Actual struggles, ongoing and permanent, can thereby recede into the background, or worse still, be unilaterally dismissed by master dialecticians. If dialectical thought is instead localized and embedded in concrete material practice, however, to be a dialectician gains a wholly new meaning: that of pressing subjectively forward in collective combat, embodying Lenin’s “leaps, leaps, leaps!” without any certainty whatsoever that a better world will be the inevitable result.

Why Counterdiscourse?
As should be clear by now, we cannot decolonize dialectics solely by prying open the cracks of immanent critique—although this is crucial, and the thinkers that make up this volume embody such cracks each in their own way. Rather, radicalizing dialectical oppositions to the very breaking point at which internal verge on external differences, and opening such opposi-
tions toward the substantive exteriority of a decolonial critique, requires that we step to the very limits of dialectics—or even beyond—before casting our gaze back. If this involves stepping beyond the geographical boundaries of traditional dialectics, so too with methodological boundaries, and it is here that Foucault offers some useful tools. I turn and return to Foucault more than simply to reclaim his theories for a radicalized dialectics, but also because he provides concrete cues for both the method and content of this project. However, as will become clear, Foucault—like the thinkers that constitute this book—is more liminal to than outside of the scope of the dialectical, and while he would locate the incommensurable oppositions he identifies as being beyond dialectics, I see these as instead marking and opening its outer limits.

This claim might seem a scandalous affront to Foucault, the avowed antidialectician, not to mention those who understand Foucault’s genealogical method as a purely critical project. But while tracing the surface and measuring the mass of Foucault’s oeuvre certainly reveals more critique than positive construct, lying beneath and slightly to the side of Foucault’s critical genealogies are subjugated counterdiscourses, counterhistories, and countermemories to be excavated and set into motion.  

To bind counterdiscourse to genealogy—the form of discourse to the mode of its recovery—is moreover but a single gesture, as the two are utterly inseparable from one another and from the subject matter of this study. Critique, for Foucault, aims “to dig” subjugated knowledges “out of the sand,” but it is the very existence of these knowledges—grounded in “struggles and the raw memory of fights”—that makes critique both possible and effective. This is more than mere excavation, and the fight is not limited to memory: the goal is instead one of “reactivating” combative memories toward “contemporary tactics,” “to set them free... to enable them to oppose and struggle.” The result of this reactivation of oppositional counterdiscourses and their setting into combative motion is, I argue, dialectical in both form and content. Genealogy, through the counterdiscourse it frees, presses toward dialectical motion.

With regard to content, counterdiscourses stand against the unitary pretensions of what Foucault calls “science” (traditional dialectics included). Genealogies are thus “antisciences” because they incite an “insurrection of knowledges” against the “centralizing power-effects” of scientific discourse, which legitimizes some knowledges and disqualifies others, establishing the ground of what does and does not count. The problem with Marxism, for Foucault—and indeed with dialectics tout court—is not...
that it lacks scientific rigor, but that it aspires to be a science in the first place (this is a sentiment that Sorel shared). Hence genealogy as method is doubled in terms of the very content that renders it effective: what is recovered is not just any historical discourse that has been occluded from sight, but rather those discourses that pose a challenge to prevailing logics and practices of unity. Nowhere is this coincidence of method and content clearer than in Foucault's excavation of what is arguably the paradigmatic counterdiscourse: what he calls, revealingly and provocatively, the "race war."

Toward the end of the sixteenth century, according to Foucault, European states consolidated their monopoly on violence and "war was expelled to the limits of the State," to the border, exiled from society to interstate relations. But a counterdiscourse to this milestone in sovereign unity emerged almost immediately, according to which "a battlefront runs through the whole of society, continuously and permanently, and it is this battlefront that puts us all on one side or the other." Such a "binary" view has clear epistemological implications: if society is divided, then no subject can be "universal, totalizing, or neutral," and all knowledge is "perspectival... interested in the totality only to the extent that it can see it in one-sided terms, distort it and see it from its own point of view."

"The truth is, in other words," he writes, "a truth that can be deployed only from its combat position." The idea of the "race war" as absolute incommensurability stands against not only ruling discourse but all unitary discourse, "tears society apart and speaks of legitimate rights solely in order to declare war on laws."

But the immediate danger that confronts all radically oppositional discourses is that they "will be recoded, recolonized by the unitary discourses." The counterdiscourse of the race war was no exception, and as a result, Foucault shows how this formerly "decentered" counterdiscourse was eventually "recentered" to "become the discourse of power itself." While one path this recentering took was the biological reification of race in Nazism, less noted but equally insidious for Foucault was the dialectical recentering of the "race war": "the dialectic codifies struggle, war, and confrontations into a logic, or so-called logic, of contradiction... ensures the historical constitution of a universal subject, a reconciled truth, and a right in which all particularities have their ordained place. The Hegelian dialectic and all those that come after it must... be understood as philosophy and right's colonization... of a historico-political discourse that was both a statement of fact, a proclamation, and a practice of social warfare."
In his attempt to reject all dialectics, however, Foucault provides potent guidance for how best to rescue and reclaim a radicalized dialectical vision. If the fundamental danger is that combative discourses will almost inevitably suffer reincorporation, recolonization, and recentering into governing doctrines of unity, it is precisely this danger that we must resist. To do so also obviously means to overcome Foucault’s own unambiguous hostility to dialectics and the mistakenly sweeping generalization, “all those that come after it must . . .” Such reverse totalization—a perennial difficulty of poststructuralist approaches that slide too easily from critique to the insistence that nothing exists beyond the object of that critique—seems to openly contradict Foucault’s own methodological sensibilities. But it also comes on the heels of a long list of qualifiers—totalization, rationality, irreversibility, universal subject, reconciled truth—to be added to a conspicuously singular term, the dialectic. What if there were to exist many dialectics that do not carry these pernicious attributes of the dialectic and that instead prioritize oppositional combat over unity?

Despite being frequently associated with the micropolitical, itself a much abused term, Foucault’s own critiques of logics of unity go hand in hand with an arguably dialectical account of the strategic (macro)unification of the tactical (micro)moments of power. As he puts it, “No ‘local center,’ no ‘pattern of transformation’ could function if . . . it did not eventually enter into an over-all strategy,” and as a result, power relations “form a general line of force that traverses the local oppositions and links them together.”42 While certainly incompatible with what Foucault most loathes about dialectics, such a view is nevertheless compatible with the radicalized and decolonized dialectics that emerge from the thinkers considered in this book, for whom the subjective moment of combative, one-sided rupture (Foucault’s “social warfare”) is jealously maintained at the expense of any final resolution, any determinist progression, in short, any foreseeable horizon for reconciled unity. Again, it is only with the help of Foucault and others who similarly walk the fine line between dialectics and its opposites—and here I count Sorel, Fanon, and Dussel—that we can approach the task of truly radicalizing and decolonizing dialectical thought.43

In a crucially different time and place, Foucault would grant dialectics the same indeterminate duality he ascribes to other discourses, the ability to serve different and even opposing purposes. This time the dialectics were Marxian and the place was Tunisia, where “everyone was drawn into Marxism with radical violence and intensity and with a staggeringly powerful thrust.” “For those young people,” he continues, “Marxism did
not represent merely a way of analyzing reality; it was also a kind of moral force... And that led me to believe that without a doubt the role of political ideology, or of a political perception of the world, was indispensable to the goal of setting off the struggle." Violence, ideology, myth, and subjectively "setting off the struggle"—all explicitly echo elements of the radicalized dialectical counterdiscourse that I sketch in this book. Far from the French Communist Party, whose influence had overdetermined Foucault's entire understanding of dialectics, the "scientific character" of Marxism—its claim to a unified truth—receded into the background as "an entirely secondary question." In other words, the primary practical function of Tunisian Marxism was the opposite of what had so alienated Foucault from its European counterparts.

It was no coincidence that this transformation occurred in the Tunisian context, beyond the "motionless movement" of Europe, where for Fanon "dialectics has gradually turned into a logic of equilibrium." And nor is it any mistake that Foucault named his paradigmatically oppositional discourse the "race war" and described its eventual recentering as a process of "recolonization." Even if this equation of recolonization with recentering gains a concrete literalness in the hands of decolonial thinkers, Foucault is already pointing us in the right direction. Decolonization for Fanon as for Dussel entails and indeed requires a fundamental break with the paradigm of totality, a deferral of dialectical closure, and the rejection of a more straightforwardly colonial variant of Foucault's "science," one that disqualifies not only knowledges (epistemological disqualification) but those very beings deemed innately incapable of producing such knowledges (ontological disqualification).

**Black Anti-Jacobins?**

A final note before I begin. Latent in all that has been said above is an ambitious comparative project, one that is both broader and narrower than what currently goes by the name "comparative political theory." If we strip away the thinkers, contexts, and methods, we are left with four identities that are too often considered to be utterly irreconcilable: class, race, nation, and people. But this irreconcilability is grounded in naturalized unities, some of which are thankfully receding into the past: structural notions of class, biological conceptions of race, the nation as a priori, or the people as a modern expression of undivided sovereignty. Built into the structure of this book, then, is an insistence on the equivalence and coevalness of different forms of political identity, and a rejection of the all-
too-frequent contempt for so-called identity politics. The idea that class is “real” whereas race is simply a backward idea to be abandoned, or that nations are “imagined communities” and nothing more, is bound up with the idea of reason in history that is so central to the same conservative dialectics we hope to bury. Just as class identity is fully capable of losing its political meaning if severed from class condition, so too does race exist in a dialect of identifying and being identified that is itself a form of class-ification.

This is not to suggest that no communities are imagined, but instead that all communities are, that imagination is a part of all political identities—class very much included—and this imagination is never divorced from material practices. It is to release those political identities from the straitjacket of teleological determinism, to allow and indeed demand that they stand forth and function, assuming their proper position at the heart of any dialectics worthy of the name. Inversely, if conservative dialectics is complicit with a hierarchy of identities, to radicalize and decolonize dialectics in a way that foregrounds the active subjectivity of their constituents is to open up a space to consider their functions comparatively, a space for the contingency of multiple overlapping and clashing identities that is better suited to what Aníbal Quijano calls the “historical-structural heterogeneity” of ostensibly postcolonial societies.

If there is a model for the sort of comparative political theorizing I hope to undertake here, for the joint analysis of race, class, nation, and people—not to mention a radicalized dialectic of decolonization in which contingency and unpredictability stand firmly in the foreground—it is C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins*. While James’s concrete task was to recover the memory of the most systematically expunged and “disavowed” event in “modern” history, the Haitian Revolution, the implications of his work far exceed this already monumental task. The radical kernel of *The Black Jacobins* lies in the fact that it was not merely a history of the world’s first successful slave revolution, but also of that decisive event with which it did not run parallel—a metaphor loaded with misleading equidistance—but was instead fully intertwined and, finally, entangled: the French Revolution. One revolution systematically erased, the other upheld on a pedestal as the “bourgeois” revolution—tipping point in a world-historic dialectical progression—the colonial veil separating the two cannot survive the piercing blow of James’s analysis, and with it goes much else.

James’s insistence on the coevalness of these intertwined revolutionary processes sets into motion an uncontrollable avalanche whose theoretical
devastation arguably exceeds the author's own intentions, leading to the collapse of strict class oppositions, and with them the notion of historical stages and inevitable progress. If the pedestal cracks under James's blunt insistence that so pre feudal a phenomenon as slavery constituted "the economic basis of the [bourgeois] French Revolution," feet of clay collapse as the narrative unfolds. 52 Rebellions on the old continent fueled freedom dreams on the new, and the unprecedented—and unthinkable—resistance of heretofore nonhumans propelled French revolutionaries to ever more radical lengths. Were it not for Thermidor, Toussaint would never have been thrust toward independence; were it not for France's utter reliance on the colonial economy, Bonaparte would never have given the final and decisive push.

More subversively still, James—a Marxist—transposes the political identities Marxists had reserved for Europe onto the colonial world and vice versa: the French masses were analogous to the Black slaves, the French aristocracy to colonial planters, and the French bourgeoisie to the privileged mulattoes of San Domingo. In sum: "Had the monarchists been white, the bourgeoisie brown, and the masses of France black, the French Revolution would have gone down in history as a race war." 53 That James uses the same term that Foucault would deploy to describe the binary division of European societies is as productive in its suggestive similarity as in the gap it reflects. The slaves were the same as the proletariat, these "half-savage slaves of San Domingo were showing themselves subject to the same historical laws as the advanced workers of revolutionary Paris." 54 But this sameness unleashed a radical difference according to which Black slaves even prefigured the European proletariat itself: "working and living together in gangs of hundreds on the huge sugar-factories . . . they were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time." 55

To subject slaves to these "same historical laws," however, was to open a Pandora's box that explodes their status as laws: without sharp class oppositions—as Sorel also insisted—there can be no historical determinism, and it was instead the revolutionary self-activity of the masses in Paris and Port-au-Prince that drove the revolutions forward, and fear of the same that would prompt their retreat. 56 Class is race, and European civilization is little more than barbaric brutality. 57 Amid the swirling contingency of transatlantic combat, no single dialectic can claim either centrality or inevitability. The pretense of automatic forward motion—itself tightly bound up with Eurocentric history—disintegrates into James's fa-
mously tragic view of history: "Sad though it may be, that is the way that humanity progresses. The anniversary orators and the historians supply the prose-poetry and the flowers." But tragedy is only tragic if we know what is coming, and the collapse of dialectical determinism is in itself a liberation in the knowledge that, in Fanon's words, "the war goes on . . .""59

I hope, however immodestly, to walk in the footsteps of this radically comparative theoretical project, drawing together multiple dialectics whose central identities—class, race, nation, and people—are neither distinguished categorically from nor reduced to one another. But to embrace *Black Jacobins* as a methodological model for thinking a decolonized dialectics raises a peculiar question: How to square the bold assertion contained in James's title with the radicalized dialectical counterdiscourse running through Sorel, Fanon, and Dussel that, I argue, can be understood on some level as "anti-Jacobin"? We are getting ahead of ourselves, however. In the wildly swirling dialectical eddies of this "tragic" history; the dynamic interaction between masses and leadership; and the fraught role of Black identity, tradition, and positivity, James's initially celebratory view of Jacobinism gives way to something far more ambivalent and indeterminate that is characteristic of a decolonized dialectics.

Where Sorel presses the dialectic of the European class struggle to its very breaking point, insisting that between worker and capitalist the only relation is one of war, Fanon and Dussel will theorize more fully the edges of the dialectic where its internal oppositions give way to not meaningless difference, but new grounds for decolonization. And if Fanon insisted that "decolonization is truly the creation of new people" through a process in which "the colonized 'thing' becomes a person through the very process of self-liberation," then Venezuela today stands as confirmation of both the radical potential of this dialectics and its lack of guarantees.60

Hannah Arendt, in her critical zeal, tacitly attests to C. L. R. James's ambitiously expansive homology between metropole and colony, arguing that both the slaves and the unfortunate *malheureux* of the French Revolution "carried with them necessity, to which they had been subject as long as memory reaches, together with the violence that had always been used to overcome necessity. Both together, necessity and violence, made them appear irresistible—*la puissance de la terre*."61 But to this *puissance* celebrated by Saint-Just, I hope to reply with a different constellation, one that spans not the distance separating the Bastille and Saint-Domingue—as in the Jamesian version—but rather between the puissance of the
twentieth-century French working class and the process, still unfinished, of revolutionary decolonization. But to do so requires that we instead shift toward that subterranean source of decolonial dialectical motion that lay not above *la terre* but below it, in those condemned nonbeings known as the *damnés*. 