

Insurgency as situated invention: Jean-Paul Sartre's materialist theory of struggles against oppression and exploitation

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to theorize insurgent political action on the basis of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. It reconstructs a Sartrean model of insurgency that prioritizes an insurgent group's capacity for situated inventions. It argues that, similar to Fanon, Sartre theorized that groups that struggle against oppression and exploitation constantly invent novel conditions that steer society in unforeseeable directions. However, these inventions of insurgent action are never absolutely contingent but always take place in concrete situations which never cease to condition them. This paper analyzes two concrete factors which condition the inventions of insurgent action: the seriality from which the group arises and to which it always threatens to return, and the actions of hostile groups. Taken together, this paper claims that Sartre provides a coherent and innovative account of insurgent political action.

Keywords: Insurgency invention struggle Sartre Fanon

In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Jean-Paul Sartre's ambitiously attempts to philosophically anchor Marxism on the intelligibility of human *praxis*.¹ According to Sartre, historical materialism, with its analysis of economic, political and ideological dynamics within definite modes of production, could only petrify into a dogmatic mechanistic dialectic if it did not succeed in founding itself on ontologically free human *praxis*. The tension which drives the historical dialectic is that between the freedom of human actions, and the material or 'practico-inert' conditions in which these actions find themselves embroiled, often overtaken and overwhelmed. Marx' statement which resonates most with Sartre's endeavour is that "human beings make their own history, but they do not make it arbitrarily in conditions chosen by themselves, but in conditions always-already given and inherited from the past".² History is nothing but free human actions, but those actions are deeply conditioned by our material surroundings.

In the *Critique*, Sartre works through a fundamental ambivalence at the heart of the dialectic between *praxis* and matter. Marx' phrase cited above does hold for any action under any

¹ Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason Volume 1*. Henceforth, I will cite the first and second volumes as *CDR1* and *CDR2*, respectively.

² *Ibid.*, 35; Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', 32.

circumstance, but it does not specify how, and when, *praxis* can really posit itself as a free, creative activity, or when it is forced to undergo the imperatives of the practico-inert environment. Practico-inert matter can indeed dominate *praxis* by enlisting it as a passive instrument which must fulfil imperatives already prescribed beforehand. On the other hand, *genuinely* free *praxis* only takes place under specific circumstances. In effect, the *Critique* represents the culmination of Sartre's committed phenomenology by claiming that human beings can only freely transform their given conditions through collective group action. Even though Sartre did not establish the specificity of *political* action (compared to other group actions), it is clear that he aimed to understand its fundamental characteristics, that is, when a collective of subjects attempts to break free from the conditions imposed on them by forming an active group.³

This paper investigates how Sartre's account of group action contributes to our understanding of *insurgent* political action. With contemporary capitalist societies still being marked by a highly unequal access to the political sphere and the persistence of various forms of oligarchic, technocratic or authoritarian rule, we have seen a resurgence of attempts to theorize political action as asymmetrical.⁴ Often, these theorists have gone back to the writings of Machiavelli or indeed Marx to conceptualize a form of radically republican plebeian politics.⁵ In a similar vein, certain authors have turned to the concept of *insurgency* as type of political action with emancipatory objectives.⁶ The thread which connects these different conceptualizations is that "insurgents are those who collectively rebel against domination in the name of freedom and equality."⁷

This paper argues that Sartre's framework contributes to our understanding of insurgent action by showing how an insurgent group arises out of and overturns a condition of social impotence which he terms seriality. In this overturning, Sartre sheds light on the group's capacity of *invention*. In and through its struggle, an insurgent group invents new ways of relating to one another, devises new strategies, establishes new structures of organization and creatively

³ This was Louis Althusser's fundamental criticism of Sartre's project, namely that one cannot establish the specificity of economic and political practices by grounding them in human *praxis*. We will not go into this criticism here. It suffices to mention that in this paper, we will develop the concept of insurgency as a *political* practice. See Althusser, *For Marx*, 117-28; Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France*, 340-60.

⁴ Balibar, *Citizenship*; Kalyvas, 'Democracy and the poor'; Rancière, *Dissensus*; Vergara, 'Populism as Plebeian Politics'.

⁵ Abensour, *Democracy against the State*; Breaugh, *The Plebeian Experience*; Del Lucchese, Frosini and Morfino, eds., *The Radical Machiavelli*.

⁶ Balibar, *Equaliberty*; Negri, *Insurgencies*; Tomba, *Insurgent Universality*.

⁷ Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, 165.

imprints its actions into the social environment. By looking at insurgent politics through the lens of group *praxis*, we can understand how insurgency turns a condition of lived subjugation into a practical power to creatively transcend those conditions. Thus, the insurgent group's capacity to invent invites an open-ended interpretation of history which goes against any mechanical or fixed model of historical becoming. As we will show, Sartre responds to a similar theoretical problem as did Frantz Fanon, who earlier criticized Sartre for predetermining the meaning of political struggles against domination in view of a fixed historical dialectic.⁸

Yet while the notion of political invention hints at the radical unpredictability of group actions, the latter remains a practical, *situated* action. Invention, in this sense, is not creation *ex nihilo* or the unrestrained freedom rid of any obstacles whatsoever. Instead, insurgent action invents itself as a practical action in relation to a surrounding environment that does not cease to pose challenges for it. In addition, the group cannot sovereignly control the meaning of its actions, because material developments and rival political actions continuously put them into question. This paper will thus analyse how, as a situated *praxis*, the insurgent group relates to its surrounding environment: how it relates to the series from which it sprang and into which it perpetually threatens to return, and to the hostile actors that populate the practical field. Taken together, these factors condition (though never in a complete way) the inventions of insurgent *praxis* as it engages in the political struggle.

This paper proceeds as follows. The first section locates the fundamental dimensions that structure our account of insurgent *praxis* through Fanon's criticism of Sartre's early Marxism and latter's subsequent response to the 'challenge' of the former. The second section lays out Sartre's view of domination in societies riven by struggle, which can take the active shape of oppression or become petrified in practico-inert processes of exploitation. The third and fourth sections describe how insurgent *praxis* arises out of the dissolution of the serial relations between the subjugated, bringing forth the capacity to invent in and through its practical group *praxis*. The fifth section shows how insurgent inventions are always situated in a social field which continues to condition them. It does so by relating insurgent inventions to the series from which it sprang and which it perpetually threatens to return to, and to the hostile *praxes* that strive to defeat it.

⁸ We can assume that Sartre had not read Fanon's criticism of him in *Black Skin, White Masks* when he wrote the *Critique*. This however only underscores the fact that both writers shared a similar theoretical problematic. Sartre met Fanon in 1961, after the publication of the *Critique*, after which he wrote the preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*. See Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*; Cohen-Solal, *Sartre*, 552-57.

1. Invention as a political category: Fanon's criticism of Sartre

In the *Critique*, invention becomes an important characteristic of group action. This has not always been the case in Sartre's writings. In fact, when Sartre first turns to the Marxist dialectic in the immediate years following the second World War, Frantz Fanon would criticize him for overlooking the capacity of political actors to invent meanings beyond what (in Sartre's view) the historical dialectic prescribed.⁹ It is worth revisiting Fanon's argument because it highlights certain key characteristics of invention which Sartre will take up in the *Critique*.

At once biographical and an account of the Negritude movement that formed in the French-speaking Caribbean and African colonized countries, the central chapter in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* poetically describes the stages Fanon himself has gone through to find (or found) a black identity that is not pathologically distorted by colonial relations of colour. Reaching the height of despair at the end of a series of failed attempts to posit this black identity, Fanon confronts Sartre's essay on the place of Negritude in world history. In this essay, Sartre argues that Negritude is a limited idea, an "anti-racist racism" which does not yet fully realize its objective role of fighting for the emancipation of all the oppressed peoples around the world.¹⁰ Negritude belongs to the negative moment of the historical dialectic, as the subjective expression of the revolt against oppression. What its authors should realize is that Negritude must *relativize* and thus transcend itself in order to join the ranks of the only true universal, that of class. As Sartre writes, "at once the subjective, existential, ethnic notion of negritude 'passes' as a result, into the – objective, positive, exact – notion of *proletariat*."¹¹

Fanon's retort to Sartre proceeds in two steps. First, Fanon does not accept the reduction of Negritude to a particular moment that awaits to be surpassed by something more universal. For Fanon Negritude does not have to consciously seek its own overcoming or dissolution in something else. "Still in terms of consciousness, black consciousness is immanent in its own eyes. I am not a potentiality of something. I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal."¹² Yet Fanon immediately complicates his account by claiming that the Negritude movement could, indeed *should* be blind as to its relation with the wider social world. It is not that Negritude is not conditioned in a myriad of different ways by historical developments. Neither is it implausible that Negritude has its own limits, blind spots and internal barriers

⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110-16.

¹⁰ Sartre, 'Black Orpheus', 154.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 181-182.

¹² Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 113.

which could be overcome in a more inclusive movement towards universality. In fact, Fanon does not even dispute that Negritude could be the subjective expression of a class position, in a way that anticipates Stuart Hall's statement that "race is the modality in which class is lived."¹³ What matters is that Negritude, as a "consciousness committed to experience is ignorant, *has to be ignorant*, of the essences and the determinations of its being."¹⁴ Yet in the same breath Fanon explicitly mentions the writings of Aimé Césaire and Jacques Roumain, Negritude writers who consciously imagined the movement's potential self-overcoming into a class universalism.¹⁵ Fanon thus leaves us at an impasse as to the status of Negritude's self-consciousness.

Without assessing Fanon's ambivalent position on the necessary ignorance of Negritude, here we merely point to the manifest tension between action and the social environment which conditions it. As Fanon acknowledges, Negritude is determined by the history and conditions of French colonialism which the writings of its authors confirm even when they do not explicitly state it. Far from an isolated phenomenon, Negritude's significance can be determined in relation to these conditions, which can reveal its respective merits or limits. For instance, Negritude poetry could, and indeed did, contribute to establish a form of cultural specificity and self-worth for black colonized peoples, at the same time as it practiced an "anti-racist racism" which could block initiatives of solidarity with other oppressed collectives. The point here is that the meaning of an action is not established in isolation, but in relation to a continuously changing social environment from which it stems and on which it acts, whether that action acknowledges these determinations or not.

It is Fanon's second criticism of Sartre, however, which is of fundamental interest to our investigation. For Fanon, Sartre's greatest offense is that he predetermined the meaning of Negritude from the perspective of a presumed and already established historical dialectic. This historical dialectic will determine whether Negritude will succeed by becoming universal or instead crumble under its own subjective particularity. Thus, Fanon writes, for Sartre "it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me."¹⁶ Does this imply that Negritude should sovereignly establish its own criteria of success (disregarding any social or historical determination), so that its only relevance lies in itself as a subjective expression? Fanon writes, "in opposition to historical becoming [i.e. the

¹³ Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 394.

¹⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.

¹⁵ See for instance Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*.

¹⁶ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.

pre-established historical dialectic], there had always been the *unforeseeable*.¹⁷ In other words, because the dimension of the unforeseeable will always escape any pre-established historical dialectic, the latter cannot decisively determine the meaning of Negritude's actions. Negritude can thus claim an autonomy of action which intervenes in its historical situation in an authentically *creative* way. Fanon affirms this in the conclusion of his book: "I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing *invention* into existence."¹⁸

It is striking that in his later writings, Sartre directly takes up Fanon's challenge. In his *Search for a Method*, Sartre criticizes the Marxist historian Daniel Guérin for what he perceives to be the latter's reductionist explanation of political action.¹⁹ Guérin analyzes the war policies of the French Girondins in the aftermath of the French Revolution in terms of the objective interests of the imperialist commercial class that stood to benefit from war with England. Sartre argues that Guérin does not study the Girondins as "real men in depth", instead he "dissolves them in a bath of sulphuric acid" which erases the specific particularity of the actors themselves.²⁰ A reductionist approach falls short when political actors make use of their freedom to intervene in the situation in unprecedented and creative ways; actions that more than once put them at odds with the interests which supposedly determine them. Thus for Sartre, the element of situated inventiveness becomes crucial on a political level as well, since without it one falls back into an mechanistic determinism which disregards the specificity of political *praxis*. Thus, in Sartre's later writings, his opponents become those mechanistic theories that "would like to reduce praxis, creation, invention, to the simple reproduction of the elementary given of our life;" those who "would like to explain the work, the act, or the attitude by the factors which condition it."²¹

Fanon's criticism of Sartre, and Sartre's indirect response to it, reveal the two basic dimensions that will structure our account of insurgent action. On the one hand, insurgent action springs from a specific situation that never ceases to condition it. The specific coordinates of the situation influence the birth of the insurgent action, its goals, forms of internal organization and plans of action, and finally its petrification or retreat into obscurity or non-existence. On the other hand, none of these conditioning factors can impede insurgent *praxis* from *inventing* itself as a creative initiative that pushes the movement of history in unforeseeable directions. We can

¹⁷ Ibid., 112.

¹⁸ Ibid., 197.

¹⁹ Sartre, *Search for a Method*.

²⁰ Ibid., 43-44.

²¹ Ibid., 151.

now turn to Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* to investigate how this account of insurgency as invention receives its full theoretical expression.

2. Scarcity and struggle: the colonization of Algeria

The concept underpinning Sartre's view that, in our history up until the present, social relations are fundamentally antagonistic, is *scarcity*. Sartre defines scarcity as the brute fact that "there is not enough for everybody."²² Treating the concept in such an abstract manner is deliberate, because scarcity does not restrict itself to the sphere of biological nourishment or hunger. There can be a scarcity of literary prizes that put writers in competition with one another, a scarcity of bus seats causing fights between would-be passengers and a scarcity of raw materials that trigger skyrocketing prices. 'In the last instance' however, scarcity refers to the impossibility for everyone to reproduce their conditions of existence. It is the omnipresent factor in the background of all our interactions with one another. As Fredrick Jameson puts it succinctly, "unintelligible in itself, simply a fact to which we cannot assign any metaphysical significance whatsoever, it [scarcity] nonetheless is the framework in which we must act, and conditions and alienates our acts and projects even in their very conception."²³

The concept of scarcity is of crucial importance because it fundamentally structures our relation to others and the world. As a result of scarcity, the material world comes to mediate the relations between human beings in a specific way. For instance, we form relations with some in order to secure sufficient resources and expel others because they threaten our livelihoods. More importantly, scarcity shapes the world as one of inescapable struggle: "In the framework of scarcity, constitutive relations are fundamentally antagonistic."²⁴ Since there are not enough resources, societies are fundamentally riven by struggle, whether on an individual level, between different groups or within them (or all three at once, as is most often the case).²⁵

In its manifest form, struggle implies that different actors stand in an antagonistic relation to one other, with each *praxis* trying to outplay the other. Two opponents immersed in battle

²² Sartre, *CDR1*, 128.

²³ Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 233.

²⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *CDR2*, 15.

²⁵ Sartre's introduction of the element of scarcity marks a fundamental transformation of his famous intersubjective account of struggle with other consciousnesses, expounded in *Being and Nothingness*. In the *Critique*, Sartre retains the conviction that struggle is constitutive of our human existence and that, in struggle, we attempt to turn the other into an object within our own project. However, struggle becomes a historical fact grounded in scarcity, insofar as it derives from our need to secure our material conditions of existence. The difference between the early and the later writings of Sartre lies in the increased importance of matter as an essential mediation between two 'consciousnesses'. See e.g. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 364; Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism*, 20.

entertain a relation of *negative reciprocity*: uncertain of the outcome of our struggle, I decide what to do on the basis of my expectations of the moves my opponent makes. I interiorize his *praxis* in order to negate it, knowing he will act likewise. In doing so, Sartre argues, I recognize my opponent as a free *praxis* capable of devising strategies that could seal my fate.²⁶ Moreover, this struggle does not pit two abstract wills against one another, but it is mediated by the material environment. Struggling actors rearrange the practical field in such a way that they can defeat their opponent. This involves mobilizing the adequate resources to carry out their own plans and attempting to undermine the other's practical attempts to rearrange the practical field. Ultimately, to repeat, the antagonistic character of societies is grounded in scarcity: in the end, the defeat or destruction of the opponent is only a means to conquer the scarce resources.²⁷

Of course, one does not witness struggle constantly taking place in an active manner. This is because power relations continue to be mediated by practico-inert matter. Because struggle unfolds in and through matter, the former can also become petrified in the latter. The petrification of struggle in matter occurs when a relation of power solidifies itself in stable practico-inert *processes*. Immediate struggle is henceforth replaced by rules and regulations, institutions, abstract structures and serial relations. The essential characteristic of an inert process is that *praxis* passively follows the rules of the organized structures in which it finds itself placed. In a process, *praxis* merely adjusts itself to the inert demands that come from outside. A bureaucratic apparatus works as a process, but so does a market environment where individuals meet each other as buyers and sellers of goods or labour. It follows that, similar to the arguments put forth by Laclau and Mouffe among others, an important goal of struggling actors is to solidify their position of power by transforming contingent *political* practices into a stable *social* process.²⁸ However, Sartre goes beyond a unilinear model of the petrification of power struggles by claiming that any inert process must be continuously sustained by *praxes* in order to continue to function. We can turn to his analysis of the colonization of Algeria to acquire a better view of the way in which *praxis* and process mutually complement each other in stabilizing relations of exploitation or domination.

It is true that the colonization of African countries was motivated by specific material circumstances: within a specific mode of production, with the existing productive technologies

²⁶ Sartre, *CDRI*, 133-34.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

²⁸ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*; Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism*. This point links to a long history in political philosophy, for instance in the writings of Machiavelli and Gramsci. See Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 181-82; Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 34-37.

and means of acquiring wealth, European powers colonized overseas territories in order to import cheap agricultural products as well as raw materials such as minerals and rubber. In this sense, colonization does not escape its prior practico-inert determinations. Yet colonization could only be carried out by a concerted undertaking, that is, by a collective *praxis*: the destruction of established communal structures, war and the deliberate “creation of a sub-proletariat of the desolate and the chronically unemployed.”²⁹ This violent *praxis* (reminiscent of the *praxis* of primitive accumulation which according to Marx inaugurated the birth of capitalism) made possible the stable conditions in which the super-exploitation of the Algerian population could take place according to the laws of the market.³⁰ Indeed, if the goal of colonization was to serve international markets, this violent *praxis* had to be transformed into a process where the demand and supply of labour could regulate much of the interactions between the colonialists and the Algerian population. In other words, by establishing the conditions of super-exploitation through a deliberate *praxis* of subjugating of the colonized, the colonizer “inscribed his violence in things as the eternal unity of this passive mediation between men.”³¹

When violent oppressive *praxis* materializes in an inert process of exploitation, struggle seems to disappear in favour of social stability. Yet, crucially, the *praxis* of oppression continues to function in order to keep the process of exploitation intact for the simple reason that left to itself, a social process cannot overcome the resistances that it is bound to elicit. Sartre emphasizes two ways in which, in Algeria, the *praxis* of oppression “complements the process of exploitation and merges into it.”³² The first is the army as an institution, which permanently stood by to quell resistances and squash protests in order to prevent any durable opposition from forming against the colonial system. The army, as an institutionalized *praxis*, represented for everyone the sovereignty of the colonialists, even though the latter did not constitute a united group and even stood in competition with one another. The colonialists were united in their common interest to perpetuate the competitive climate which sustained the colonial situation. The army was the visible incarnation of this common interest. The second was the concerted efforts on the part of the colonialists to prevent any interference from the metropolitan centre that could bring an end to the colonial situation. By means of propaganda and political

²⁹ Sartre, *CDRI*, 717.

³⁰ Marx, *Capital*, 873-76.

³¹ Sartre, *CDRI*, 718.

³² *Ibid.*, 721.

influence, the colonialists attempted to erect an impenetrable fortress that withstood any attempt at reform from the outside.³³

We thus see how Sartre's analysis of the colonization of Algeria goes beyond a conceptual model which merely opposes prior political action to social passivity. In fact, since the practico-inert process of exploitation never fully stabilizes itself, it continually depends on violent oppressive *praxis*. The system of colonization "must therefore create itself [i.e. *praxis*] in order to maintain itself [i.e. process], and change in order to remain the same."³⁴ In this way, in a phrase that resonates beyond this practical example, Sartre shows how colonization is a *controlled process*: the process of passive activity that mediates social relations could never do away with practical groups of supervision and control that reflect the sovereignty of one grouping over the other. According to Sartre, the dual presence of exploitation (as process) and oppression (as *praxis*) explains the ambivalent experience of the colonized, who perceives his situation as both an inert destiny and a direct form of oppression: "Even if an individual interiorizes it as a feeling of inferiority (adopting and accepting in immanence the sentence which the colonialists have passed), even if he sees his colonized-being as a negative determination and an original statute of sub-humanity, ... he does not cease to experience this condition, this ontological statute, as the inexorable and unforgivable violence done to him by a hard-hearted enemy."³⁵ Even when it becomes petrified in practico-inert structures, neither colonizer nor colonized ceases to experience the colonial situation as a struggle.

3. Group praxis as the dissolution of seriality

As both *praxis* and process, the colonial enterprise in Algeria was only possible on the basis of the reduction of the native population to serial impotence, which succeeded by disintegrating the existing communities, rejecting integration into the colonizing society and dissolving any new group formation.³⁶ A collective of individuals exist in a state of seriality when everyone finds himself constrained to adopt the behaviour of the others, a process effectively imposed on him by the structure of the series.³⁷ Sartre argued that Algerians were connected in seriality when they all found themselves reduced to selling their labour power, each one conditioning the behaviour of the other through the competition which governed the supply and demand of

³³ On the *praxis* of oppression of the colonizer, see Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 89-120.

³⁴ Sartre, *CDRI*, 719.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 723-24.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 722.

³⁷ Poster, *Sartre's Marxism*, 66-72.

labour. For the colonizers, seriality became a key political goal because it prevented the oppressed from contesting the brutal conditions imposed on them.

However, even though the colonial regime reduces the colonized crowd to serial impotence at this point, it also reshapes social relations in such a way that a future contestation, on a different basis and taking a different shape, could become possible. The *praxis* of the oppressors plays a crucial role here. By targeting their oppressive violence against the natives (both in the founding act of colonization and in its perpetual renewal) the colonizers signal to the colonized that they share the same fate. In contrast to the impersonal and serialized process of labour exploitation, visible acts of oppression (for instance when the army violently breaks up a protest) reveal the sovereign unity which ties together the colonialists and, as a negative image, the potential unity of the oppressed themselves. The colonized can then try to actualize this unity, not as seriality, but as self-determination in the form of insurgent *praxis*.

This is the point at which a series can turn into the group, and, indeed, where we can locate the core determination of insurgent *praxis*. Group *praxis* occurs when a collective of individuals liquidate the seriality which governed their relations in order to make possible a real unity of action based on conscious and practical goals. Whereas in a state of seriality, individuals are characterized by their mutual impotence to escape or contest their condition, the group expresses the power to practically intervene in the situation.³⁸ For example, the colonial army suppresses a local strike. When the violence of the army far exceeds the scale of the local action, riots erupt everywhere in the country. These actions, often still serial (i.e. without a unity of action but propagated through imitation), sketch the possibility for a united action through an organized platform which demands the end of colonization. It is at this final point that resistance turns into group action, which can practically intervene in the given situation in order to bring about a novel state of affairs.

What distinguishes the serial gathering from the active group is the latter's practical *power*. Seriality established a statute of impotence between the members of the gathering. In this sense, every other remained Other to oneself, as he adopted and perpetuated the behaviour imposed by others. Within seriality, no one could escape the basic coordinates of this relational structure. In the group, the other becomes *the same*.³⁹ We share the same plight, and on this basis we can act together in order to achieve a shared goal. This goal was never a possibility for the members

³⁸ Catalano, *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's Critique of Dialectical Reason*, 169-73.

³⁹ Sartre, *CDRI*, 277.

of the series, and if it did exist in the heads of some of them, this could only be expressed as a frustration or a longing wish. In the group, however, the goal becomes a concrete possibility. The group acquires the power to intervene in the situation, to totalize the environment in a novel way and to confront the antagonist *praxis*. In a word, the group emerges as a political actor in a terrain of struggle.

4. The invention of common *praxis*

Sartre characterizes the transformation of the series into the group as the *invention* of a common *praxis*.⁴⁰ The invention of group *praxis* signals the fact that there is no necessary or causal relation which leads from the series to the group. To be sure, pressures from external circumstances can facilitate the birth of a group. Certain material factors make it so that a series of individuals experience their fate as shared (e.g. through their spatial proximity in a definite space); alternatively the antagonist behaviour of an enemy *praxis* can produce a danger which invites a common response. But the definitive transformation of a series into a group can only ever be brought about by a performative act of invention. A qualitative change takes place through the act of group-formation that cannot be reduced to the previous moments or determinations of the particular situation. Indeed, the group invents *itself* as a new type of sociality among its members, who transform a situation of necessary alterity into a shared project. The qualitative change which accompanies the transformation of the series into the group is probably best expressed when Sartre cites Montjoye, who wrote that at the eve of the storming of the Bastille in 1789,

Paris was a new city. Regular cannon shots reminded the people to be on their guard. And added to the noise of the cannon there were bells sounding a continuous alarm. The sixty churches where the residents had gathered were overflowing with people. Everyone there was an orator.⁴¹

Indeed, Sartre argues that at this moment “the city was a fused group.”

The invention of a common *praxis* underscores how the negation of the negation is a creative act. Most often, the group arises out of a danger: something (a hostile *praxis* or a dominating practico-inert arrangement or both) threatens a collectivity of individuals in their very being-in-the world, which induces them to act together in order to negate the threat. The negation of

⁴⁰ Ibid., 387-88. For a systematic study of the dimension of invention in Sartre’s later writings, see Basso, *Inventare il nuovo*.

⁴¹ Sartre, *CDRI*, 357-58.

the negation does not return us to an initial state where both negatives cancel each other out. Instead, the group *praxis* negates that which threatens them in a novel rearrangement of the practical field. This includes bringing into being new ideologies, slogans and forms of consciousness, new goals, tactics and strategies and new organizations and institutions. Group *praxis* thus unfolds as a continuously creative totalization, with the practical goal to overcome that which threatens them. The invention of a common *praxis* is thus correlative to the actions that the group invents in the course of its struggle.

We can only speak of *authentic* inventions when a group freely determines how it transforms itself and the practico-inert field. In other words, inventions must arise in view of the goals which a group has freely chosen and not from a previously constituted practico-inert imperative. Earlier in the *Critique*, Sartre criticizes the view that a professional ‘inventor’ is a genius individual who freely totalizes the environment in a perfectly singular way. Instead, an inventor is one who makes himself into an “exigency-man”, “an inessential mediation between present materiality and the future it demands.”⁴² In the phase of industrial capitalism, for instance, competitive pressures on employers required that water be removed faster and under lower cost from their mines. Inventors were those individuals who set themselves to fulfil this imperative, so that when James Watt created a more efficient steam engine, he merely materialized that which the practico-inert already sketched beforehand. The professional inventor passively mediates between the present and future which the total process demands.

In contrast, the inventions of a group do not ultimately abide by the laws set by the practico-inert. The inventions of the group *praxis* are its own, and they serve the group insofar as they further its own end. In and through its inventions, group *praxis* “sovereignly affirms its own possibility - simply through the emergence of the undertaking.”⁴³ The group is a revolt against practico-inert destiny because it affirms that it can determine its own freedom, that is, set its own goals and invent the means to attain them. Thus, the relationship between the group *praxis* and the practico-inert environment undergoes an essential transformation: instead of undergoing imperatives which are ‘untranscendable’, the group attempts to transcend, that is, to transform the practical field in view of its freely chosen aims. The group’s project rejects the alienation characteristic of the professional inventor since it does not ultimately further the ends of inert materiality but attempts to achieve sovereign mastery over its own ends and means and ultimately over the field in which it exteriorizes itself. Whereas the basis of the project of the

⁴² Ibid., 192.

⁴³ Ibid., 405.

professional inventor lies *elsewhere* (in practico-inert imperatives), the group's project is its own, *here*.

5. Situated insurgency

In group *praxis*, a previously impotent collective of individuals sovereignly invents a common future through a united action. This does not imply, however, that the group reaches a stage where its common action frees itself from all limitations or determinations, or where all obstacles disappear. On the contrary, even as a sovereign action, group *praxis* is a situated action which continues to be immersed in a practical and material field determined by scarcity and struggle. This means that the group's inventions must still fall within its range of "objective possibilities."⁴⁴ According to Sartre, the inventions of the group's common project respond to multiple and variegated exigencies that in the last instance refer back to a danger: that of the disappearance of the group, the only instrument with the help of which the subjugated could change their impossible conditions of living. The remainder of this paper will analyse how insurgent group *praxis* responds to two crucial factors of its situation: how it responds to the series which is its source and its danger, and to the antagonistic *praxis* with which it enters into a political struggle. Taken together, these factors help to define the specifically Sartrean view of the situated inventiveness of insurgent *praxis*.

a) Groups and series

In the first place, the group invents ordered structures that prevent it from falling back into seriality. For a group, the series presents itself first and foremost as a danger. A group-in-fusion is a spontaneous, fleeting endeavour where the group manifests itself in its least rigid form. Parisians have stormed the Bastille and Paris will never be the same again. But when the fused group has achieved its first goals, a new imperative manifests itself: the enemy is regrouping and plans a new decisive attack. The members of the group come to realize that their primary goal must be to sustain the opening they have created, which is only possible through the group's continued existence. The ensuing struggle of the group is therefore also one against the group falling back into seriality. What distinguishes more organized groups from the group-in-fusion is the introduction of an inertia that will prevent the group from disappearing after a first initiative. According to Sartre, underlying the differentiation of roles and responsibilities in an organized group is a pledge of fidelity of the group members towards the group. The pledge is *a practical invention of a new statute of sociability* among the members of the group. At the

⁴⁴ Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism*, 72-84.

same time, this invention of a pledge that ties the members of the group together also restricts its future choices. As Sartre writes, “the pledge is an inert determination of the future. ... Regardless of subsequent developments of praxis, of the event, or of the developing totalization (up to and including the level of historical totalization), one element will remain non-dialectical: every member's common membership of the group.”⁴⁵ The insurgent group thus rigidifies its internal structures in order to repel the primary danger of falling back into seriality, regardless of circumstances.

This is not the only relation between the group's inventions and seriality, however. Sartre repeatedly emphasizes that the series (which the group dissolved at the precise moment of its birth) will continue to condition the group “in interiority.”⁴⁶ The group transforms the series, but only through a continued engagement with its concrete determinations. For instance, during a factory strike, the group members do not act on the basis of their abstract humanity, but on the basis of their practico-inert determination as a worker at that factory. If Sartre designates group *praxis* as a “negation of a negation”, it is because the group only acts against conditions that in a certain shape or form already threatened the lives of its members. Thus, when the group acts in view of the negation of certain conditions, these conditions already characterize the group itself.

What is more, the group will also positively affirm certain characteristics of the series. This can take a variety of forms. Certain inert characteristics of the series can become a source of pride or a form of identification in the group and be consciously appropriated by it (e.g. the anti-colonial struggle takes the shape of National Liberation, a characteristic which before merely tied the serialized colonized with one another). In the extreme, a group can present itself as the image of what the serial ensemble could become if all its members actively contributed to the common project, that is, as “an embodiment of the serial ensemble in its sovereignty.”⁴⁷ Thus an institutionalized labour union (or a political party, action group etc.) can represent itself as the unity of the serial class ‘at a distance’, as the totalization of the entire class which could only come about when embodied in a group that is situated at a distance from the series itself.

The positive affirmation of certain characteristics of the series can in turn hinder the further development of the group without the group being aware of it. Stated differently, the group can adopt certain characteristics which act as invisible walls that block certain possible, and

⁴⁵ Sartre, *CDRI*, 420.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 673.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 691.

sometimes vital, roads from being taken. We can return to Sartre and Fanon's analysis of Negritude to provide a striking example. If Negritude writers started to essentialize (or fetishize) the Black experience as a reaction to colonial domination and exploitation, this could impede it from opening up to subject positions that could together form a more durable opposition to capitalist social relations. It is always possible, however, that the group discovers that these inert characteristics borrowed from the series are real obstacles to its further project, prompting it to undertake determined efforts to eliminate them. In effect, this is how one could read the poetry of Roumain and Césaire, as Fanon quotes them in *Black Skin, White masks*.

Finally, Sartre emphasizes how the series *sustains* the group by remaining a permanent source of energy for it.⁴⁸ The conditions of exploitation or oppression which continue to mark the serial collective of those subjugated provide material for renewed group initiatives. Certain new events can prompt individuals to join the group, or to establish their own groups (fused or organized) on the basis of a similar dissolution of the series. New developments within the series can become the source for new campaigns, strikes or actions, with which the group aims to further its own cause. Sartre writes that "the group, in fact, from the practical point of view of its action, can no longer conceive [the series] except in the synthetic form of potentiality."⁴⁹ The group thus perpetually scans the series in search of material with which it can further its cause. We can add that the negative image of this phenomenon is the group's betrayal of the series, when the group members use the group to satisfy their own interests by cutting their ties with the broader serial collective. Indeed, manipulating the link between the group and the impotent serial collective becomes of key strategic importance in any struggle between hostile *praxes*.

b) Groups in struggle

We can now turn to how the inventive *praxis* of an insurgent group is conditioned by its opposition to a hostile *praxis*. We have seen how scarcity necessarily creates a terrain of struggle, but that this struggle usually becomes petrified in inert structures or processes. Within societies marked by relations of domination, this petrification of power relations works in the interest of the ruling class, who can rule without having to constantly rely on organized oppressive *praxis*. If successful, an *insurgent praxis* reveals that an oppressive *praxis* hides beneath these passive processes. Insurgent *praxis* shows that the 'necessity' of certain processes

⁴⁸ Ibid., 687.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 687.

(such as the iron laws of supply and demand that structured the labour market in colonized Algeria) is the outcome of previous *praxes* which imbued matter with this specific ‘hardness’.

As a consequence, insurgent *praxis* tends to elicit a powerful response from a hostile opponent who can no longer rely on inert processes to secure its dominance. This returns us to the definition of struggle as negative reciprocity, with two (or more) opponents interlocked in a battle. The actors involved devise plans and strategies to obtain certain goals, outwit their opponent and transform the shared social field in a favourable way. The struggle therefore conditions the inventions of the different group *praxes*: engaged in the political conflict, both have to obey the imperative of defeating their opponent. When the struggle unfolds, it for instance becomes clear for the insurgent actor that it should operate on certain crucial strategic terrains, form alliances with specific groups, build adequate resources to repel threats etc.

It is important to stress that the struggle between hostile *praxes* unfolds in a shared material field which produces objects that bear the trace of this conflict. In the effort to undermine each other, struggling opponents often externalize their actions in the same objects. As one *praxis* invents something that furthers its own cause, his antagonist can work on the same product in an attempt to undermine its effectiveness. In the second volume of the *Critique*, Sartre describes these products of mutually opposing *praxes* as “anti-labour”, a form of negative collaboration which produces an object which neither *praxis* intended, but which bears the mark of each of them.⁵⁰ Sartre gives the example of the establishment of the National Workshops in France in 1848 during the short-lived Second Republic. In order to provide unemployed workers with jobs, Louis Blanc, one of the members of the provisional government, devised the plan for the establishment of National Workshops. However, during the course of its realization the plan was diluted, diverted and undermined by hostile interests to such an extent that when it finally came into being it could only be “a monstrous and deformed reflection of a project that had itself preserved only a confused signification.”⁵¹ The failure of the National Workshops contributed to the June uprisings of 1848. This leads us to conclude that inventions are often not the transparent objectifications of a single struggling actor, but that they are overdetermined by the struggle itself, resulting in compromised and therefore ambiguous objects. In effect, in the struggle between hostile *praxes*, transparent objectifications as produced by one victorious

⁵⁰ Sartre, *CDR2*, 96-97.

⁵¹ Sartre, *CDR2*, 96.

praxis are rather uncommon. Instead, the unpredictable struggle will continually produce outcomes that neither actor originally intended.

In conclusion, we can invoke Negritude and Fanon in relation to Sartre's theory of situated insurgent *praxis* one last time. Since an insurgent group makes decisions that leave a (semi-)permanent mark in the environment, every invention necessarily gives up alternative possibilities. The Negritude tradition provides a striking example of this.⁵² When Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor acquired prominent political positions, they sought to reconfigure the nationalist course which dominated the struggle against colonialism (and which Fanon himself championed).⁵³ Noting the economic, social and cultural interdependence between metropolitan France and the overseas regions, Césaire and Senghor went against the grain of the nationalist revival by envisaging post-national federal institutional frameworks with shared models of citizenship and reciprocal duties towards one another. That the struggle for decolonization eventually took a nationalist shape was not inevitable, shown in the defeat of alternative paths not taken at the moment of decision. This shows that great social and material pressures cannot block insurgent actors from inventing a novel, unpredictable arrangement of the social field which upsets preconceived models. It is therefore more productive not to see in Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* the "fulfillment" of Sartre's *Critique*, as Roberto Bernasconi has done, but one possible materialist and strategic reading of the insurgent situation next to which others were possible.⁵⁴ This view of insurgent inventions does justice to Fanon's earlier thesis which opposes *the unforeseeable* to deterministic historical becoming. The negation of the negation is an affirmation that is more or less conditioned by circumstances, but always creative and contingent.

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⁵² Wilder, *Freedom Time*.

⁵³ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Both Césaire and Senghor became delegates from overseas territories to the French National Assembly. Césaire became mayor of Fort-de-France in Martinique and Senghor president of the Republic of Senegal.

⁵⁴ Bernasconi, 'Fanon's "The Wretched of the Earth" as the Fulfillment of Sartre's "Critique of Dialectical Reason".'

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