
Review

Decolonizing Dialectics

George Ciccariello-Maher

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The title of Ciccariello-Maher's book contains an ambiguity that touches on a tension permeating recent scholarship on decolonizing critical theory: for the 'decolonizing' prefix furnishes two competing readings. In one sense, it directs us immediately towards the term it precedes: here, 'decolonizing dialectics' suggests a theoretical project first and foremost, where the principal concern is to identify a brand of dialectics absolved of direct complicity in colonial injustice – a *decolonized* dialectics, if you will. In another sense, however, the term carries a more external orientation: here, it points insistently to a world outside of theory, calling for a dialectics *that decolonizes* rather than one that is itself, necessarily or fully, decolonized.

The space between these readings and the projects they imply is significant. Recent contributions in this area have demonstrated the difficulty of holding them together in equitable fashion. Whether through accident or design, the tendency has been to centre the task of sterilizing critical theory of its colonial impurities, often at the expense of any real sense of connection with – or relevance to – concrete struggles of decolonization. It is partly for this reason that *Decolonizing Dialectics* marks such a welcome and timely arrival. Ciccariello-Maher's aim in this book is twofold: he intends both to excavate a radical 'counterdiscourse' of dialectics located in the work of George Sorel, Frantz Fanon, and Enrique Dussel, and to read this alternative dialectics into practical struggles against colonial and racial oppression. This is, as such, a work of theory that simmers with concern for the practical. Against a conservative dialectical paradigm – rightly, he argues – indicted for its inherent determinism, teleology, and Eurocentrism, Ciccariello-Maher attempts to give shape to a radical, pluralistic, combative, and open-ended alternative. Not only is this radical dialectics more consonant with – and, in fact, already embedded in – decolonial struggles, he claims, but also 'more faithful to the dialectical spirit than even some who gave the approach its name' (p. 13).

The excavation begins with revolutionary syndicalist George Sorel. In Chapter 1, Ciccariello-Maher discusses Sorel's theoretical contributions, grounded in his



discontent with orthodox Marxism and its failure to anticipate or offer response to the frozen class struggles he encountered in turn-of-the-century France. Sorel emphasized the role of ideology and subjective intervention in arresting, and potentially restarting, dialectical motion; he distinguished (bourgeois) *force*, which serves to uphold social hierarchy, from (proletarian) *violence*, which tends towards its destruction; and he considered the role that unifying myths might play in reestablishing dynamic social oppositions. Each of these ideas, Ciccariello-Maher argues, represents a move in the radicalization of dialectical thought (rather than its rejection).

It is with Fanon that this radicalization becomes also decolonial. Chapters 2 and 3 foreground, respectively, the Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, picking out the development of his dialectical thought across the two texts. Ciccariello-Maher shows, first, how Fanon's own confrontations with a dialectic caught in stasis cause him to walk similar paths to Sorel. With the racialized subject condemned to a 'zone of nonbeing' (pp. 55–58) in which their full humanity is denied, dialectical motion is, Fanon found, precluded. Restarting it would depend on a moment of 'counterontological violence', (p. 70) in which the racialized subject 'makes oneself known' through an act of combative self-assertion. For Ciccariello-Maher, though, it is only with the transition to a more overtly decolonial register in *The Wretched of the Earth* that the full intricacies of Fanon's dialectical thought become evident. Against those who read Fanon's call for the *damnés* to invert the Manichaeism of the colonial order through assertions of strict national identity as a problematic form of absolutism, or even as leading only towards a cycle of violence, Ciccariello-Maher finds a much more nuanced (and incessantly dialectical) revolutionary theory. He emphasizes the 'imperfect, mobile, and dynamic character' (p. 86) of the nation that Fanon theorized and its trajectory from simplistic national consciousness/identity towards a new politics of nuance, multiplicity, and complexity. Ciccariello-Maher's Fanon offers a perspective imbued with appreciation for the inherently multi- and intra-dialectical character of decolonial struggle, and the potential for both internal and external social forces to corrupt and derail it.

Chapter 4 places this Fanonian dialectics in 'productive parallax' (p. 104) with Enrique Dussel, a thinker who, for Ciccariello-Maher, 'teeters on the edge of a total rejection of dialectics', but whose 'decolonial sensibility prevents him from abandoning [it] entirely' (p. 108). Dussel's particular importance here lies with his Levinasian-inspired notion of *exteriority*, which serves to counter the totalizing tendencies that stubbornly haunt dialectical thought. Rather than allowing itself to be subsumed into the field of dynamic oppositions that constitutes the dialectical system, exteriority maintains a fix on a realm of positive alterity incommensurable with that system. For Ciccariello-Maher, this 'leverage to pry open an indeterminate future' (p. 115) is vital if the dialectics arrived at is to be stripped of residual



pretensions towards closure and (false) reconciliation. Or, to put it differently, if it is to be defended as truly decolonized, and *decolonizing*, in form.

Chapter 5, finally, reads the radical, decolonized dialectics developed across preceding chapters into the subject of the people in Venezuela's 'Bolivarian Revolution'. Drawing on Dussel once more, Ciccariello-Maher demonstrates something of the analytical and critical potency of his dialectical lens. Against the 'Eurocentrically overdetermined form' given to the category *the people* by, among others, Hardt and Negri, where it is reduced to little more than a 'unifying and homogenizing supplement to sovereignty and the state' (p. 128), Ciccariello-Maher proposes an inherently combative, divisive, multi-dialectical, and dynamic mode of popular identity, crucial to overcoming oppression and ontological exclusion. The decolonized dialectical lens, the chapter suggests, enables us to expose such failures in our established conceptual resources and, in the process, gives us a unique insight into the deeper complexities of concrete decolonial struggle.

Chapters 1–5 are bookended by introductory and concluding chapters – 'Ruptures' and 'Spirals' – that add further conceptual, historical, and political depth to the radical dialectics Ciccariello-Maher identifies. The combative, pluralistic, and open-ended nature of this dialectics renders it, he argues, not only crucial to anti- and decolonial struggles narrowly understood, but also, potentially, an 'indispensable weapon' (p. 160) to resist ontological exclusion and oppression more generally.

Two issues arose for me in reading Ciccariello-Maher's book, both of which relate to the tension noted at the outset of this review. The first (more minor) pertains to a frequent slippage of language in the way that Ciccariello-Maher presents (and views?) the book's project and achievements. He refers to the radical dialectics he identifies as 'decolonized', only occasionally adding that it is also 'decolonizing' in character. The problem is that this terminology feels like a gesture towards closure that is at odds with the theoretical and political stance Ciccariello-Maher would have us embrace. It ushers us quickly past the question of a potential enduring complicity in colonial injustice even within the radical perspective derived here. But this is surely a question that must be kept open and foregrounded, if I read the intent and implications of Ciccariello-Maher's position correctly.

The second (more significant) issue concerns the book's relation to the practical question of decolonization. Ciccariello-Maher tracks what he calls a 'decolonized dialectical practice' (p. 157) in the history of anti-colonial resistance – which proceeds, he suggests, largely independently of dialectical philosophy. But, if this is so, it raises the question of his project's purpose. Who exactly stands to gain from the excavation of a theoretical 'counterdiscourse' of dialectics? Ciccariello-Maher does not explicitly tell us how the dialectical lens he outlines might serve practical struggles of decolonization. Of course, given that the presumption to counsel the oppressed on the nature and proper course of their struggle is precisely one of the



traits of dialectical thought he means to escape, this is understandable. However, without something more direct and substantial in this regard, one is left wondering whether we are in fact witnessing here, in the end, merely another demonstration of the apparent innocence and analytical efficacy of a particular theoretical viewpoint. That is, again, in effect, a quiet eschewal of the practical problem of how to actually advance aims of decolonization in contemporary contexts.

There can, in any case, be little doubt that *Decolonizing Dialectics* marks an important contribution to a growing body of literature concerned with decolonizing critical – and, more broadly speaking, political – theory, as well as a worthwhile addition to the works devoted to the dialectical tradition and its critics. In particular, Ciccariello-Maher's readings of Fanon and Dussel offer a valuable new take on their respective engagements with dialectical thought, and on the complex and fraught relationship that dialectics shares with decolonization, theoretically and practically. The outcome is a rich defence of the role that *a certain kind of* dialectics not only might play, but arguably already does, in struggles against ontological exclusion and oppression. It may well be that Ciccariello-Maher's radical dialectical perspective is capable of yielding a response to the anxiety noted above – an anxiety that is, it should be noted, largely provoked by the clear and unequivocal concern with practical imperatives of decolonization displayed in this book. It remains uncertain, however, whether that response can be found within these pages.

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