Transcending the Paradox of Violence
A Dialectical/Dialogical Interrogation of the Colonial/ Anti-Colonial Struggle in Algeria

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Abstract
The growing complexity of contemporary globalized human culture, while creating greater opportunities for human relation, has likewise generated profound challenges to our human capacity to relate meaningfully. Using Gillo Pontecorvo’s 1956 film The Battle of Algiers, Frantz Fanon’s paradigmatic text The Wretched of the Earth, and the writings of Albert Camus as representative accounts of colonial/anti-colonial violence in the Algerian struggle for independence, this article will question the legitimacy of a dialectical approach to transcending the paradox of violence, proposing instead a manner of dialogical reconciliation through the human capacity for solidarity-in-relation.

Keywords: colonialism, violence, Albert Camus, dialectic, The Battle of Algiers

People like myself want not a world in which murder no longer exists (we are not so crazy as that!) but rather one in which murder is not legitimate. Here indeed we are utopian—and contradictory. For we do live, it is true, in a world where murder is legitimate, and we ought to change it if we do not like it. But it appears that we cannot change it without risking murder. Murder thus throws us back on murder, and we will continue to live...
in terror whether we accept the fact with resignation or wish to abolish it by means
which merely replace one terror with another.

— ALBERT CAMUS, *Ni Victimes, ni bourreaux*¹

In the fall of 1943, Albert Camus joined the French Resistance and began
writing for its principal publication, *Combat*. During this period (Camus
would serve as the newspaper’s Editor-in-Chief until 1947), Camus wrote
extensively about the challenges faced by humanity in his time, particularly
those posed by violence. By summer of 1945, he had begun to recognize the
unresolvable contradiction between the reality of what he witnessed and the
ideals of what he believed to be true of humanity. In his editorial “Image
of Occupied Germany,” Camus described an “unhappy, war-torn Europe,
divided between victims and executioners and seeking a justice that can never
be reconciled with its pain.”² In September of 1945, he expounded on this
notion further, noting that humanity of his day existed in “a world in which
we must choose to be either victim or executioner—there is no other choice.
And the choice is not easy.”³

Yet Camus did not stop with this contention, did not remain confined
to the choice between two poles that were equally damaging to human life
and human dignity. Beginning in November of 1946, Camus began a series
of editorials grouped under the title *Neither Victims nor Executioners*, in
which he raised the question of the possible transcendence of the presumed
irreconcilability between “victim” and “executioner.” With these editorials,
Camus called into question not just the conditions and human tendencies
which create the roles of “victim” and “executioner” themselves, but also the
reliance on binary thinking that limits choice to one or the other.

What follows here is not an attempt to settle definitively the questions
that surround the crisis⁴ of violence. Rather, the present article proposes a
different view of this crisis, a view that preserves the integrity of each pole
in tension and respects the necessity of the tension itself. As an illustration
of the irreconcilable tension between “victim” and “executioner” which
Camus⁵ describes, the present article begins by discussing the analogous
tension between colonialism and anti-colonialism as portrayed in Gillo
Pontecorvo’s 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers*, a paradigmatic depiction of the
violent dialectic of colonialism–terrorism, and in Sohail Daulatzai’s 2016 text

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⁴ The crisis of violence as discussed by Camus and others refers to the existential and ethical dilemmas posed by the nature of human violence.
Fifty Years of The Battle of Algiers: Past as Prologue. Daulatzai sheds new light on the forces at play in Pontecorvo’s film while also demonstrating the profound implications of the film in today’s conversations about how individuals, societies, and nations relate to each other. Greater context is then provided by asking whether the particular tension discussed by Pontecorvo may best be understood as “dialectical,” before finally turning to the question of how, dialectically or otherwise, the crippling paradox of violence may finally be transcended.

Violence is at the heart of The Battle of Algiers from the outset. The film begins in a French military office in 1957 in the moments immediately after an Algerian has been tortured for information. Representative of other similar instances of interrogations by torture, this particular interrogation is undertaken to learn the whereabouts of Ali la Pointe, who, under the leadership of El-hadi Jafar (a dramatized portrayal of Saadi Yacef), was a guerilla fighter and leader of the anti-colonial resistance movement in Algiers. After this brief introduction to what ultimately becomes the climactic event of the film (la Pointe’s final confrontation with the French military authorities), we are taken back to 1954, when the tensions between the colonizers and the colonized of Algeria had begun to reach a tense apex that would lead ultimately to intractable violence. In prison for a minor offense, la Pointe witnesses the execution of a fellow Algerian. Presumably la Pointe is profoundly affected by not just the execution itself, but also by the condemned man’s shouts of “Allah ‘akbar [Allah is the greatest]” and “taeish ‘aljiria [Long live Algeria]” with which he proceeds to his death and the shouts of the same expressions with which his fellow prisoners respond. This experience is sufficient to radicalize la Pointe in sympathy toward the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) and its efforts to overthrow French colonial rule in Algeria.

The film recounts the continual escalation of violence between the Algerians and their French colonizers. Assassinations of French police officers by Algerians are met with violent arrests, interrogations, and ultimately a bomb placed in the heart of the Kasbah by the French. This bombing begets more violence from the colonized Algerians, culminating in the placement of bombs in the European Quarter by FLN-directed Algerian women. Viewers of the three bombing scenes—at a café, a milk bar, and the office of Air France—may recoil at the indiscriminate killing of women, men, and children who
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seemingly play only indirect roles in the oppression of Algerians. This is, of course, understandable, as even the bombers themselves are demonstrably troubled by the full human cost of their actions. At the same time, however, the women are driven by the conviction that such violent acts are the only way that French colonial rule may finally be undermined and a free and autonomous Algeria established.

This point is dramatically underscored by Larbi Ben M'hidi, one of the main political leaders of the FLN-led effort for Algerian independence, when he is questioned by the French media immediately after having been captured. Pressed on whether it isn’t indeed “cowardly” to use “women’s baskets to carry bombs, which have taken so many innocent lives,” Ben M’hidi implicitly concedes this contention while explicitly implicating the French in similar violence on a far grander scale. Alluding to the French military actions in Southeast Asia, Ben M’hidi turns the question around, asking whether it is not “even more cowardly to attack defenseless villages with napalm bombs that kill many thousands of times more,” adding that “obviously, planes would make things easier for us. Give us your bombers, sir, and you can have our baskets.”

Violence is implied in the very premises and practices of colonialism; thus the act of colonizing is itself an originary act of violence. The violence that fully encompasses the French transgressions against Algeria, and thus the true impetus for the FLN-led violence in response, can be found in the 130 years of French colonial occupation, during which time native Algerians saw their lands, their livelihood, and their identities diminished. Even Lt. Col. Mathieu, the primary face and functionary of French colonial power in the film, seems to know this. After noting that “the problem is this—the FLN wants to throw us out of Algeria, [and] we want to stay,” Mathieu articulates to a French-Algerian press contingent the violent, and ultimately necessary, cause-and-effect relationship that this problem inexorably brings into play. “Do you want to stay in Algeria? If the answer is yes, then you must accept all consequences.” By their very presence in Algeria, Mathieu recognizes, the French colonial body has created a context that can only—inevitably and necessarily—erupt in violence.

Much of the philosophical underpinning that explains and legitimizes violence against the forces of colonialism in general, and against the French
in Algeria in particular, can be found in the writings of Frantz Fanon. It was Fanon who claimed that “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon,” primarily because the act of colonization that preceded it was itself predicated on violence. Colonization, he argues, is, fundamentally, a violent act that dehumanizes the colonized, destroying their world as well as their place in it. In addition to the overt acts of violence often employed by a colonizing force to achieve its goals, there is a latent but profound violence which destroys the livelihood, history, and identity of those who are colonized. Fanon contends, “a national culture under colonial domination is a contested culture whose destruction is sought in systematic fashion.”

Fanon further suggests that violence is both the means to reclaiming one’s home as well as to reclaiming one’s humanity: “It is precisely the moment [the colonized] realizes his humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure its victory.” In this sense, violence enacted by the colonized is not merely an expression of retaliatory rage, or misguided manifestations of fear and ignorance. Instead, the turn to violence is an intentional existential act toward the re-realization of personhood and the re-claiming of home. Further, according to Fanon, violence is not simply one way of achieving this—it is the only way:

Violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organized and educated by its leaders, makes it possible to understand social truths and gives the key to them. Without that struggle, without that knowledge of the practice of action, there’s nothing but . . . a minimum of readaptation, a few reforms at the top, . . . and down there at the bottom an undivided mass, still living in the Middle Ages, endlessly marking time.

To recognize Pontecorvo’s film as an intentional portrayal of Fanon’s anti-colonial ideology is to recognize in the FLN-led Algerians the compulsion toward violence as a means to reassert their personhood and to claim autonomy over the land that had historically been theirs. The acts of violence to which they ultimately resort must be seen as a response to the profound violence perpetrated by the forces of colonization. The acts of torture depicted in the film, as disturbing and horrifying as they may be, are not isolated nor originary
acts of violence to which the French have resorted only to quell recent Algerian violence. To fully understand the film and to rightfully recognize its Fanonian understanding of the history of colonialism, Algerian violence must be properly situated as a response to the systematic and institutional violence that had dominated their existence since the arrival of French colonial power in 1830. In his recent work *Fifty Years of The Battle of Algiers: Past as Prologue*, Sohail Daulatzai appropriately acknowledges this lineage of violence:

> We have to understand violence in more systemic forms as well that don’t include only the bomb, the gun, or the tool of torture. Violence is also the exploitation of the country, the seizing of land and its resources, the legal and political codes that enforced the destruction of Algerian social life, and the wealth accumulation that structured the asymmetries of political, diplomatic, and military power. And then there is the epistemic violence that imposed French history and language within schools, and other institutions of the country that marginalized the varieties of Algerian social and cultural lives to be expressed and to flourish. Colonialism is indeed a violent phenomenon, and we have to be attuned to the myriad forms this violence takes and through which it is routinized and normalized within the everyday functioning of empire.  

Violence, for the resisting colonized Algerians, was thus a necessary means to counter and to overcome the violence that had structured and defined their lives.

Daulatzai resituates Gillo Pontecorvo’s film in the contemporary conversation on violence, specifically the competing yet synergistic violences of imperialism and terrorism. Daulatzai contends that the central concerns of decolonization depicted in *The Battle of Algiers*—structural inequality, exploitation, and the violent intervention of colonialism—remain globally relevant today, and that it is of the “systematic silencing” of these concerns that the film “continues to be a haunting reminder.” Daulatzai suggests that the colonial spirit that fostered the Algerian unrest, which finally erupted in revolution in 1954, is terrifyingly alive and well in Western, particularly American, treatment of those who, both at home and abroad, do not fit with
the accepted conception of personhood. If it may be said that colonialism legitimizes itself through a view of the colonized as inferior, it may equally be said that the Western view of the Third World as inferior is parallel with, and in fact dangerously close to, the spirit and the reality of colonial violence.

On the surface, the fundamental tension presented in *The Battle of Algiers* is very straightforward: Algerians seeking their independence begin systematically committing acts of terroristic violence, which they believe to be both necessary and reasonable, to drive out the French. The French, in response, turn to torture as both a necessary and reasonable means to uncover the leaders and plans of the FLN, so as to curtail the violence and reaffirm their colonial rule over Algeria. The tension to be resolved, therefore, arises in the difficulty in identifying with one side over the other and judging one side or the other to be “right” or “wrong.” Whereas Daulatzai contends (rather convincingly) that the film ultimately compels identification with the Algerians, could a similar case be made for identification with the French? And if such a case can be made, how is this tension to be resolved?

Both Pontecorvo’s film, and the writings of Frantz Fanon with which there are so many parallels, present historical and theoretical examples of the kind of relationship-in-contradiction which might be called ‘dialectical.’ The elements in-relation, French-led colonists and FLN-inspired Algerians, both owe some aspect of their identity to the presence of the other, and also to the relationship, fractured and contradictory as it may be, that exists between the two. While the principal acts of violence depicted by the film are the bombings by the Algerians and the subsequent torture by the French, a greater legacy of violence is implied by the very presence of colonial power. Further, it is precisely this legacy that, in Fanonian terms, both necessitates and legitimizes the violence with which the colonized respond: “From birth it is clear to him that this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called into question by absolute violence.”

Yet if the Hegelian conception and development of the dialectical process is taken as paradigmatic, should “dialectic” be applied to the history of Algeria in particular, or the inherent struggle between colonialism and anti-colonialism in general, not merely as a description of the historical reality but also as a philosophical designation of an ideal account of the process and its ultimate telos?
The terminal point of the Hegelian dialectic is reached precisely because of the nature and relation of each step along the way; although the dialectical relationship is undergone as a particular struggle, the “wounds” suffered in that struggle are causally constitutive of the ultimate resolution of the dialectical tension. In this sense, it may be contended that even the most nefarious conditions may be accepted, if not wholly justified, because by their presence they contributed to the progression that would ultimately foster a kind of reconciliation of the contradiction that defined the original relationship between the opposing sides. Hegel’s account of “lordship and bondage” further validates this contention.

It is precisely on account of its unbalanced nature that the lordship–bondage relationship must fail, thus necessitating the dialectical evolution that Hegel describes. The self-consciousness of the lord is dependent upon a reflective other-consciousness on the part of the bondsman as an echo and legitimation of the lord’s own self-consciousness, yet the bondsman does not possess the requisite self-consciousness to reciprocate, seeing itself only as a being for the consciousness of the lord. Ironically, by being in a position of subservience, the bondsman, through work, begins to achieve a level of self-consciousness as well, becoming “conscious of what it truly is,” ultimately paving the way for the depth of self-consciousness of the bondsman to exceed that which was possessed, from the outset, by the lord. Presumably this process of relegation–re-emergence that constitutes the dialectical movement would continue until an Absolute state of equality—unity—would be achieved. Yet by its achievement the unity would legitimize and justify each stage of relegation and subjugation along the way. The sublation of each stage, by both altering and preserving, implicitly posits the necessity of all of the attendant qualities of each and every stage.

If the dialectical process is, as Hegel contends, dictated by necessity and the infallibility of human reason toward the revelation and realization of an ultimate telos, then all of the constitutive stages and elements along the way would necessarily retain validity, importance, and legitimacy, precisely by being necessary for the completion of the dialectical process. Thus if the colonial/anti-colonial confrontation, either in Fanonian terms or as it is presented in Pontecorvo’s film, is to be designated as dialectical, then the movements and transgressions of both sides, colonialist and anti-colonialist, must be regarded
as manifestations of historical necessity that will, ultimately, culminate in the final and absolute resolution of the original dialectical tension.⁹

Taken as an account of the dialectic of violence, *The Battle of Algiers* accomplishes a great deal. To begin, the film compels viewers to question the legitimacy of colonial/imperial power, and to begin to identify with the colonized despite their commission of horrific acts of violence. At the same time, and as Daulatzai notes, the film provides a revealing lens through which to re-investigate the questions of nationalism, terrorism, and migration that are so relevant in today’s discourse. In fact, the film has continued to have a profound influence on the conversations and the actions surrounding imbalances of power around the globe, from South America to North and Sub-Sahara Africa to the inner cities and ghettos that spawned the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the United States.²⁰

Yet perhaps a more important legacy of *The Battle of Algiers* may be discovered by refusing to accept the method depicted by the film as paradigmatic of an ideal resolution of the original colonialist/anti-colonialist tension, by further questioning the conditions that made violence the necessary means to resolve the dialectical tension. To classify Pontecorvo’s film as a dialectical account of the resolution of the colonialist/anti-colonialist struggle is to concede that the violence through which the FLN eventually achieved Algerian independence was necessary. Yet only a modicum of human compassion is required to recognize, in the aftermath of each explosion and the resulting scenes of dead French “colonists,” that these deaths cannot wholly be excused or justified. And Pontecorvo, despite his sympathies for the Algerian side, surely meant to convey this irreconcilability of violence against violence. There is an arresting symmetry in the way in which Pontecorvo depicts the aftermath of each bombing, whether perpetrated by the French or the FLN: The wake of the explosion in the Kasbah is captured with slow, wide-panning shots, revealing the breadth of the devastation, interspersed with close-up shots of individuals dead and dying. For a full two minutes (beginning at approximately 37:58), the viewer watches while survivors work together to rescue the wounded and remove the dead, while the only sound is the slow, mournful music of Ennio Morricone’s “Rue de Tebes.” Of course the FLN response to this bombing is to place their own bombs in a café, a milk bar, and a travel bureau, and the devastation wrought by the FLN-placed
bombs is depicted by Pontecorvo in exactly the same fashion: the same slow, wide shots of the destruction, the same close-up shots of the dead and the dying, the same mournful music of Morricone’s “Rue de Tebes,” and the same communal response to rescue the wounded and remove the dead. Here Pontecorvo suggests that both the French colonialists and the FLN-led anti-colonialists all enact, and endure, the same devastating violence, and that perhaps there is no fundamental difference that can justify either.

If it is reasonable to conclude, as the Colonial French did, that torture is acceptable because it may prevent further harm and death, then it is equally reasonable to conclude, as the colonized Algerians did, that bombing a café is acceptable because it may bring about an end of the systemic and institutional violence that has structured their existence. Although either contention on its own may have its own merits, as potentially contributory to a final resolution of violence as a dialectical tension, neither position, nor their conjunction, is particularly satisfying. Yet, given the full “story” offered by both Pontecorvo’s film and Fanon’s philosophy, it would appear that there is no more satisfying solution available to the problem of violence.

Whereas a dialectical engagement with the paradox of violence may eventually lead to a reconciliation and a resolution to the immediate problem, the perpetuation of violence necessary to achieve this dialectical reconciliation ultimately fails to transcend the paradox of violence itself. Perhaps the more significant problem lies not merely in either individual position, but also in the way in which the progression of their conjunction is understood and allowed to develop. Perhaps, rather than positing a dialectical process as the ideal means of addressing and attempting to transcend the paradox of violence, a dialogical process should be undertaken. An example of this kind of dialogical approach may be found in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s account of the hermeneutic experience, which depicts a path through relation (explicitly characterized as dialogical) to a particular evolutionary resolution of the dialectical tension, relying less on a preservation (through sublation) of each element-in-relation and instead prioritizing the relationship itself, constituted in and as questioning. It is the question, Gadamer contends, that creates and perpetuates the openness of experience. Hermeneutics can thus be defined as an open and reciprocal dialogue. In raising and pursuing the question, an open dialogue is formed and perpetuated in the reciprocity of question and answer.
as both elements-in-relation address each other in question and in response. This openness is not constrained by the weight of necessity that characterizes Hegel’s dialectical understanding or by the presumed priority from either side to preserve (through sublating) what it imagines its own identity to be. Instead, the reciprocity, the relation, is primary. Both “poles” of the relation emerge in their meaningfulness within and derive their meaning from the relation itself, and it is precisely this dialogical “discipline of question and answer” that fosters the realization of meaningful relation.

Questions regarding the history and legitimacy of colonial and anti-colonial violence, either in mid-twentieth-century Algeria or at any other time and place in human history, are not easily understood or engaged as a binary either/or. Nor is this refusal to yield a simple “right and wrong” either/or solution exclusive to the history and ideology of colonialism. The challenges facing national and global culture today—many of which center around or yield profound violence—similarly resist such simple, absolute, and binding answers. Rather than a strict adherence to a satisfying binary, even dialectic, simplicity, these kinds of challenges necessitate a particular manner of questioning and a fidelity to the openness of dialogue necessary to cultivate new manners of understanding and relating that are the proper expression of reverence for humanity. By its very nature, open and earnest dialogue requires a fundamental mutual respect for the other—individually or collectively—explicitly as human.

This is precisely the conclusion that Albert Camus would ultimately reach, as he struggled both personally and intellectually with the causes and consequences of violence. In 1958, with the publication of a series of essays detailing his personal engagement with the “crisis” in Algeria from 1939 to 1958, Camus acknowledged not only the shared consequences of violence for all of humanity but also its mutual responsibility: “The reprisals against the civilian population of Algeria and the use of torture against the rebels are crimes for which we all bear a share of responsibility. . . . [W]e must refuse to justify these methods on any grounds whatsoever, including effectiveness. Once one begins to justify them, even indirectly, no rules or values remain.” In his 1955 “Letter to an Algerian Militant,” Camus was even more explicit in his acknowledgment of a shared right to the land of Algeria for both the French and the Arab populations, while clearly positing
nonviolent and earnest “living together,” despite the apparent futility of such a suggestion, as the only fair, reasonable, and progressive way to resolve the conflicts of colonialism in Algeria. He concludes, “Yes, the essential thing is to leave room, however limited it may be, for the exchange of views that is still possible.” Finally, Camus’ last public statement on the Algerian conflict, “Algeria 1958,” declared that complete liberation of the Arab population from the French colonial system was absolutely necessary. It demanded explicit rejection of colonialism, of the misleading illusion of assimilation, of the relegation of the Arab population to a sub-proletarian position, and of the “complex of humiliation” that had characterized too much of the French demeanor toward the Arabs in Algeria.

Yet as important as these proclamations are, particularly with regard to a specific conflict that bore such immediate relevance for him personally, such statements were ultimately little more than the application of principles that Camus had been expounding for more than a decade—that the more enduring victims of violence are the values that constitute human existence as such. In *The Rebel*, his book-length essay on rebellion as both a metaphysical and historical phenomenon, Camus noted that revolt has, and must always maintain, its founding and guiding principle in the human experience of solidarity in a shared struggle:

> The affirmation implicit in every act of rebellion is extended to something that transcends the individual in so far as it withdraws him from his supposed solitude and provides him with a reason to act. . . . It is for the sake of everyone in the world that the slave asserts himself when he comes to the conclusion that a command has infringed on something in him which does not belong to him alone, but which is common ground where all men—even the man who insults and oppresses him—have a natural community.

The injustice of human suffering, particularly as a result of violence, is not merely that an individual has suffered; rather, it is more fully constituted in the subsequent realization that violence and suffering are ultimately an affront to the very idea of human dignity. Yet perhaps what is more striking here is Camus’ insistence that this solidarity must extend to all of humanity,
even those factions that may be taken to be the cause of any individual’s or group’s suffering. The particular effects of any act of violence are ultimately discrete, but not wholly unique, manifestations of the human capacity to commit and suffer violence, a capacity that helps define the human condition; to experience this aspect of human existence is, according to Camus, likewise to “realize that this feeling of [suffering] is shared with all [humanity] and that human reality, in its entirety, suffers from the same distance which separates it from the rest of the universe.”

Humanity is united by its shared capacity to suffer, and by its attendant capacity to relate through this shared capacity to suffer.

In his Foreword to *Camus at Combat*, David Carroll, notes:

Underlying [the distinction between “victim” and executioner”] is another, unarticulated question, which is whether one should accept in the first place that the only choice one has is to be either a victim of murder or a murderer oneself. That such a choice is unacceptable, that it constitutes no choice at all, and that even in an age of terror, alternatives exist to being either a victim or a murderer are things of which it would seem we need to be reminded once again.

Carroll is right. There is an urgent need to be reminded that there are alternatives that are not adequately captured and conveyed in the paradox of “victim”/ “executioner” and that cannot be resolved through a dialectic sublation of the attendant features of either designation. The dialectic relationship of lordship and bondage that Hegel described, driven by contradiction and subjugation toward an absolute reconciliation which may never be fully realized (and may not even be possible), is ill-equipped to resolve the irreconcilable tension of violence present in, for example, the colonialism/anti-colonialism conflict. A dialogical approach, however, may more appropriately engage, perhaps even transcend, the paradox of violence. Such an approach must be grounded in the shared recognition that both parties belong on equal ground by virtue of being human beings. Further, a dialogical approach must center around the understanding that, independently of the unique challenges that may characterize any one situation, the greater challenges to human existence as a whole, experienced
most acutely as suffering and death, are equally experienced by all regardless of particular circumstance and thus constitute a uniting, rather than dividing, presence. As Camus suggested, “the real question is not how to die separately but how to live together.” This “living together” can only be achieved by recognizing and respecting the bonds of relation that unite all of humanity, despite the fundamental and necessary tensions that may arise and threaten our potential for human solidarity.

As an ideal to be pursued, the goal of profound solidarity-in-relation, and open and earnest dialogue, presents several obvious challenges. To begin, how can this ideal be brought to bear on situations that are already characterized by the unbalanced relationship of lordship and bondage? Or, in the case of the FLN-led Algerians in 1954, what other options did they have? If the ideal of solidarity and dialogue is to prevail, must the colonized bear sole responsibility for it, and must they therefore respond to the violence perpetrated against them with renewed and continued attempts to engage the conflict solely dialogically? Of course, this is not a reasonable expectation; to posit dialogue and solidarity as a plausible route toward resolution presupposes that the opposing sides, despite present tensions, stand on commonly understood and mutually recognized ground as “human.” Further, and perhaps more importantly, this course presumes that both sides recognize the need for and value of dialogue and solidarity. Far too often, even this seemingly modest beginning is rendered impossible by situation or circumstance; violence is inflicted and justified as a direct result of the failure to recognize, accept, and abide the simple foundational understanding of shared humanity. In such cases, the marginalized and oppressed may, perhaps must, respond appropriately and in kind, as a defense of themselves and of the principle that all human life is worth preserving and that human dignity is worth defending.

Yet at the same time, the circumstance must not be permitted to preclude the pursuit of a lofty ideal pregnant with the possibilities for better human relating and, perhaps even, a harmonious “living together.” The ideal of a dialogical pursuit of solidarity-in-relation—the “formidable gamble that words are more powerful than munitions”—must be pursued. Solidarity-in-relation and open dialogue are fundamental human capacities which can, if undertaken in a committed fashion, ultimately effect a true transcendence of the paradox of violence.
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Notes

This work was originally intended, in fact began, as a simple review of Sohail Daulatzai’s book Fifty Years of The Battle of Algiers: Past as Prologue. Over the course of writing the review, deeper questions regarding the legitimacy of violence, whatever its justification, continued to assert their immediacy, motivating a deeper questioning of the necessity of violence of any kind. The present article, as an account of one particular evolution of thinking about this problem, may best be understood as an opening salvo, a foundation for future deeper investigation into the paradox of violence and the prospects for its transcendence.

4. “Crisis” is used here not only to convey the urgency of this situation wherein there is so much at stake, but also the necessity of deciding. If violence continues to stand as a legitimate, even normalized, human response to tension and difference, then surely human culture as we have idealized it will suffer a grievous blow, surpassed only (but profoundly) by the suffering of the individuals themselves against whom such violence is perpetrated.
5. It must be noted here that Camus himself was profoundly involved, intellectually and personally, with the question of Algerian independence. Born and raised in Algeria as a pied noir, Camus had deep roots to the country that remained in place until his death. And although he did not personally live in Algeria all his life, his mother did. Thus, in answer to a question about the struggle in Algeria while in Stockholm to accept the Nobel Price for Literature in 1957, Camus stated the following: “People are now planting bombs in the tramways of Algiers. My mother might be on one of those tramways. If that is justice, then I prefer my mother.” Yet even if this personal stake in the question were wholly removed, it is reasonable...
to contend that Camus would have retained his fidelity to a middle path to settle the crisis in Algeria, rather than accepting either the maintenance of the colonial occupation or the wholesale expulsion of the French from the country. This contention will be taken up again toward the conclusion of this article.

6. From this response, however, one should not conclude that Ben M'hidi wholly endorsed terroristic violence as the ideal means to achieve Algerian independence. While discussing terrorism and the upcoming strike with Ali La Pointe, Ben M'hidi admitted that “terrorism is useful as a start,” but ultimately confessed his contention that “acts of violence don’t win wars—neither wars nor revolutions.”


8. Ibid., 237.
9. Ibid., 43.
10. Ibid., 147.
12. Ibid., xv.
13. It is precisely this imbalanced relationship, predicated on presumption of superiority and inferiority, wherein the real philosophical problem lies and the dialectic of violence originates. This point will be clarified and expanded on in the next section.
14. Daulatzai suggests that the film compels not just sympathy for the Algerians but also tolerance for their violent acts: “To watch The Battle of Algiers and see yourself in Hassiba, Ali, or Omar is to reclaim a radical legacy—and is an insurrectionary act.” Daulatzai, Fifty Years of The Battle of Algiers, xv.
15. Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 57.
16. Hegel's conception of “dialectic” begins with the simple assertion that the dialectical process is a process of contradiction and resolution between opposing sides; in its ideal form, the dialectical process entails a movement from less sophisticated ideas toward more sophisticated, and from more fractured and disparate toward more unified. This evolutionary progression, according to Hegel, is ultimately governed by logic; driven by necessity and guided by human reason, the dialectical process will progress toward greater and greater sophistication and unity, until an absolute reconciliation is reached. Yet although the process is evolutionary and thus entails progressive refinement of each stage, despite their relative lack of sophistication, no step along the dialectical progression is wholly discarded. Through the process of sublation, each step is altered but preserved as a necessary element in the progression, without which the ultimate telos could not be reached.
17. This account, presented in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, begins by positing that the dialectical process arises in the mutual recognition of separate self-conscious entities, each regarding the other as a distinct, discrete instance of the same kind of natural being as itself. In order to preserve the primacy of its own natural being, one self-consciousness is inclined to negate the other, not through
its destruction per se, but through its relegation, thereby failing to recognize (in fact, subconsciously concealing) the commonality of their shared manner of natural being. As Hegel explains: “Because to begin with they are unequal and opposed, and their reflection into a unity has not yet been achieved, they exist as the opposed shapes of consciousness; one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman” G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, with analysis by J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 115.


19. This is not to suggest that the Hegelian conception of the dialectical relationship should be taken as paradigmatic. Yet although this particular conception has been convincingly discredited, as George Cicariello-Maher contends, present colonialist/anti-colonialist confrontations have occasioned a return to the Hegelian dialectic in an attempt to better understand, and perhaps resolve, these confrontations: “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.” See George Cicariello-Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 2.

20. This point, which Daulatzai posits in *Fifty Years of The Battle of Algiers*, is expounded upon in far greater detail in his *Black Star, Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom beyond America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

21. One very significant problem that immediately, and perhaps irrevocably, directs the development of the dialectical relationship is the inequality of standing and power. As George Cicariello-Maher contends, Fanon’s attempt to address the colonialist/anti-colonialist tension was fundamentally undermined by the profoundly unequal nature of the relationship itself: “Fanon saw [a dialectic] short-circuited by white supremacy, in which the basis for reciprocity—which Hegel took for granted—did not yet exist” (Cicariello-Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics*, 7).


23. As, e.g., in Hegel’s lordship and bondage illustration of the dialectical process.


25. “Violence” as a descriptor here need not be limited to its manifestations in war, terrorism, and colonialism as depicted by Camus, Pontecorvo, and Fanon. It may likewise apply to the conditions that foster marginalization of individuals and cultures and that limit equal access to basic human rights and resources. This point is further explicated in my essay “Reading, Violence, Solidarity” (*Zeteo*, December 5, 2016).

26. Emmanuel Levinas contends that simply through the recognition of the other, through dialogue with the other, one is compelled toward concern for the fate of the
other as if that fate were one’s own fate: see, e.g., “Philosophy and Transcendence” in which he writes “That face facing me, in its expression—in its mortality—summons me, demands me, requires me: as if the invisible death faced by the face of the other—pure alterity, separate, somehow, from any whole—were ‘my business.’ . . . The death of the other puts me on the spot, calls me into question, as if I, by my possible indifference, become the accomplice of that death, . . . as if even before being condemned to it myself, I had to answer for that death of the other, and not leave the other alone to his deathly solitude.” Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy and Transcendence,” in Alterity and Transcendence, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 24–25.


32. “We know today that there are no more islands, that frontiers are just lines on a map. We know that in a steadily accelerating world, where the Atlantic is crossed in less than a day and Moscow speaks to Washington in a few minutes, we are forced into fraternity—or complicity. The forties have taught us that an injury done a student in Prague strikes down simultaneously a worker in Clichy, that blood shed on the banks of a Central European river brings a Texas farmer to spill his own blood in the Ardennes, which he sees for the first time. There is no suffering, no torture anywhere in the world which does not affect our everyday lives” (Camus, Neither Victims nor Executioners, 15; emphasis added).

33. The importance of solidarity as a path toward greater human understanding and relation is taken up in similar fashion by Richard Rorty, who defined solidarity as “the ability to see more and more traditional differences . . . as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation—the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of ‘us.’” Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (Cambridge, UK; Cambridge University Press, 1989), 192.

34. Camus, The Rebel, 22. Anthony Bower translates the beginning of the quoted passage as “the first progressive step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling of strangeness is shared with all men.” Throughout this portion of the quoted text, Camus is discussing the human response, individually and collectively, to the absurdity of human existence in the world and the suffering that results from the encounter with the absurd.
“Strangeness,” as a stand-in for absurdity, is above clarified as “suffering” to emphasize that Camus is not merely concerned with absurdity per se but rather with the consequences of the human encounter with absurdity.

35. Camus at Combat, xxvi.
37. Camus, Neither Victims nor Executioners, 23.