

CONTRADICTORY SYNTHESSES:
NORMAN MAILER'S LEFT
CONSERVATISM AND THE
PROBLEMATIC OF
"TOTALITARIANISM"

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NORMAN MAILER'S SEEMINGLY PARADOXICAL POSITION of "Left Conservatism" may have its basis in certain mechanisms contained within the problematic concept of "totalitarianism." I suggest that there are two aspects to the broader problematic of totalitarianism. The first aspect has to do with what we could refer to as the historical phenomenon of totalitarianism. This phenomenon is represented by certain political regimes and/or types of socio-political organizations called totalitarian, to which are attributed a number of shared characteristics such as rule by a single party, an official ideology, and a monopoly of mass communications. From Mailer's slightly different perspective, such totalitarian regimes are thought of as suppressing the past, suppressing myth, and imposing a cowardly conformity on their subjects. Here, in short, we find the view of "a system" exhibiting certain characteristics. There is also, however, another facet to the totalitarian problematic having to do with the discourse of totalitarianism itself. From this slightly diverging angle one would observe that the discourse of totalitarianism is one whose very logic confuses political "sides" and therefore destabilizes "standard" political antagonisms. What we have here is a convergence of political opposites, the plasticity of political/ideological oppositions, and a profound ideological ambivalence.

Not everyone would readily accept the central thesis of totalitarianism's theorists, namely that the former USSR and Nazi Germany can be put in the same category. And, naturally, even fewer would accept that American democratic capitalism can itself be implicated in such a problematic category—yet, of course, that is what people like Mailer never tired of arguing.

Now, when Mailer critics discuss totalitarianism they usually refer to what I called the “phenomenon” of totalitarianism—that is, to a “system” with certain characteristics. Although there is much to be said in this area, I believe it is equally productive to approach totalitarianism as a discourse exhibiting certain paradoxical properties. In what sense is it helpful, then, to think of totalitarianism not just as a system but in the way I am suggesting—as a discourse perpetuating the political confusion that produces it in the first place? First of all, the view of totalitarianism as political confusion allows us to confirm that Mailer's Left Conservatism does not surface for the first time in *The Armies of the Night*, although it is there the term first appears, nor does it properly belong to Mailer's 1960s work only. Left Conservatism, in other words, is not a later stage in Mailer's ideological development. It is there from the start, in the uneasy relationship of the author of *The Naked and the Dead* to that book's most fascinating characters, Cummings and Croft, both of whom are fascists.

Critics have discussed this tension, starting with *The Naked and the Dead* as well as its development in Mailer's later works, in terms that are primarily moral, philosophical, aesthetic. Joseph Wenke, for example, has argued in his highly interesting study:

[I]t is clear that until Mailer was able to write “The White Negro,” totalitarianism was a particularly intimidating and intimate enemy of his art. In addition to representing an external political threat, it presented itself to Mailer as an immediate *aesthetic* problem that insinuated itself into the very creation of his first three novels. (Wenke 8, emphasis mine)

The problem Wenke refers to is, precisely, the profound appeal that characters such as Croft and Cummings held for Mailer even as he was placing them on the side of the “heavies.” And, in general, I think it is fair to say that this tension has been mostly discussed in terms similar to Wenke's. Indeed I sometimes have the sense that the political field has to be preserved intact in

such critical efforts, as a sort of stable ground from which Mailer's course can then be observed and appraised—so that, for example, in his opening to the violent (a)morality of Croft, Mailer can be said to be moving “to the Right.” This approach is somewhat problematic for, in my view, the problem or paradox here is first of all political in nature. Moral and other considerations follow. That is, it seems to me wrong to try and retain the political as a stable reference point, which can then help us explain aesthetic problems and/or moral ambiguities, because the origin of the ambiguity lies with politics and ideology.

The argument, then, is that when one is working within the framework of the discourse on totalitarianism, one is bound to activate a host of paradoxical political/ideological effects (or, perhaps, side-effects), which are conducive to the development of ambivalent and problematic stances such as Left Conservatism. There are effects we could discuss. To avoid too protracted an analysis, however, I have isolated two, of which I would like to say a little more in this essay. So, to recapitulate, totalitarianism is a discourse which ultimately functions to undermine standard political oppositions and which, therefore, causes great political and ideological confusion. When working within the framework of this discourse one is bound to become implicated in a number of paradoxes, such as (1) the force one sets in opposition to totalitarianism (that is to a totalitarian “system”) often turns out to be itself totalitarian or potentially totalitarian; (2) within the context of a specific political/ideological antagonism, *opposition to* may finally be indistinguishable from *support for* whatever it is one is ostensibly opposing. Or, perhaps even more paradoxically, one's political ends may be better served by supporting one's political opponent: the best way of effectively opposing one's opponents may finally be to support them.

With totalitarianism *qua* political confusion as our guide, then, we can attempt to tackle some of the salient curiosities in the development of Mailer's ideology, which seem to me to have been often met with a sort of embarrassed silence. One such very interesting curiosity was already noted by Diana Trilling in her seminal, early essay on Mailer's work:

[H]ad Mailer been of their period [i.e., that of D. H. Lawrence and W. B. Yeats] instead of ours, he would have similarly avoided the predicament of presenting us with a hero not easily distinguishable from his named political enemy. He would have been

able to evade the political consequences of consigning the future of civilization to a personal authority morally identical with the dark reaction from which it is supposed to rescue us. Or, to put the matter in even cruder terms, he would not have exposed himself to our ridicule for offering us a God who is a fascist. (Trilling 127)

I have not read many critics trying to follow the lead offered by Trilling here and to explain, if Mailer's God is indeed "a fascist," how we might be able to justify such a rather unexpected reversal? Yet there are places in Mailer's work where this *political* exchange with fascism is more than obvious. The following example I take from "The White Negro," where we are told:

[I]t is possible, since the hipster lives with his hatred, that many of them are the material for an élite of storm troopers ready to follow the first truly magnetic leader whose view of mass murder is phrased in a language which reaches their emotions. ("The White Negro," 355)

The first thing to note is that the very terms used by Mailer ("storm troopers," "magnetic leader," "mass murder") take us beyond the field of morality and even aesthetics and points us clearly in the direction of organized politics. And I think that the way, finally, to explain such ironies is precisely with reference to the first paradox I spoke about. Namely, the idea that when one works within the totalitarian discourse, the force one posits as a counterweight to the dreaded totalitarian system will often turn out to be itself totalitarian or potentially totalitarian.

The work of Georges Sorel (1847–1922), a French theorist of anarcho-synicalism, is important for the proper understanding of our second paradox. *Réflexions sur la Violence*, his best-known work to which I will refer, was published in 1908. For the sake of brevity I would not like to go into the details of what I hold to be Sorel's own "Left Conservatism." Instead I have chosen a few quotations, which will give an idea of the basis for the comparison to Mailer. The first comes from an essay on Sorel, written by Isaiah Berlin:

Sorel remains, as he was in his lifetime, unclassified; claimed and repudiated both by the right and by the left. . . . He appeared to

have no fixed position. His critics often accused him of pursuing an erratic course. (Berlin 296, 297)

I think that both the lack of political “fixity” but also, all the more so in fact, the idea of an interstitial position between “the right and the left” clearly points us in the direction of Left Conservatism. The second extract comes from the English author and painter Wyndham Lewis, according to whom

Georges Sorel is the key to all contemporary political thought. Sorel is, or was, a highly unstable and equivocal figure. He seems composed of a crowd of warring personalities, sometimes one being in the ascendent [sic], sometimes another, and which in any case he has not been able, or has not cared, to control. (Lewis 119)

When I first read the above what instantly came to my mind was Mailer’s description of his own personality in *The Armies of the Night*, where we read:

[T]he architecture of [Mailer’s] personality bore resemblance to some provincial cathedral which warring orders of the church might have designed separately over several centuries, the particular cathedral falling into the hands of one architect, then his enemy. (*The Armies of the Night* 28)

Clearly, the two descriptions are nearly identical. Sorel’s “warring personalities” find their near-perfect equivalent in the “warring orders” of the church of Mailer’s personality. And I hope it is clear how the volatility of both personalities might be relevant to constructs such as Left Conservatism. Beyond the obvious resemblance suggested by the above extracts, it is possible to argue that Mailer often appears to share with Sorel a marked hostility towards what we perhaps could call social democracy but might be better off defining more carefully as social compromise, social peace and what Mailer has called politics as property.¹

In her discussion of “In the Red Light,”² Jean Radford notes that while characterizing the support for Goldwater in rather negative terms, “Mailer is able to admit his own excitement at the thought of Goldwater’s victory” (Radford 69). She attributes this, in part, to what she calls Mailer’s “own ver-

sion of ‘*politique du pire*’ (and with this idea of a *politique du pire* we enter the heart of our second paradox). “Johnson” she writes “will only blur the reality of America’s conflicts whereas Goldwater will polarize America and out of that polarization some hope for the revolution might come” (Radford 69–70). What is noteworthy here is the preference for an energetic, violent opposition, the prospect of which is better embodied, for Mailer, in the Goldwater candidacy. A variation on this motif is the idea from the *Presidential Papers*³ that for the physical body as well as the body politic, an “acute” disease is preferable to a “faceless” one. According to Sorel, as he explains his own notion of *politique du pire*, the success of a Marxian “catastrophic” revolution—his ideal—requires that the capitalist system be functioning properly up to the moment of revolt. In turn, this proper function demands an openly predatory middle class brutally and unapologetically exploiting a proletariat, which in response becomes progressively more militant. Thus, Sorel writes that the revolutionary doctrine

will evidently be inapplicable if the middle class and the proletariat do not oppose each other implacably, with all the forces at their disposal; the more ardently capitalist the middle class is, the more the proletariat is full of a warlike spirit and confident of its revolutionary strength, the more certain will be the success of the proletarian movement. (Sorel 86)

One of the more interesting elements in Sorel’s theory is that capitalism’s progress towards its self-dissolution appears as a sort of “unconscious” historical process:

It might . . . be said that capitalism plays a part analogous to that attributed by [Eduard von] Hartmann to the Unconscious in nature, since it prepares the coming of social reforms which it did not intend to produce. (Sorel 85)

Now, I don’t think that the “Unconscious” Sorel has in mind here is quite the same as the Freudian unconscious. In fact, I might as well admit that I may be “lost in translation” since Sorel obviously uses a French translation of a German term which T. E. Hulme, the British translator of *Reflection*, renders as “Unconscious.” In any case, I think that for the Mailer critic this idea

of an unconscious, natural process that is somehow undermined by social peace and compromise is a very interesting one indeed. So for Sorel any adulteration of the implacable antagonism between the middle and working classes acts as a disruption of an unconscious development:

If . . . the middle class, led astray by the *chatter* of the preachers of ethics and sociology . . . seek to correct the *abuses* of economics, and wish to break with the barbarism of their predecessors, then one part of the forces which were to further the development of capitalism is employed in hindering it, an arbitrary and irrational element is introduced, and the future of the world becomes completely indeterminate. (Sorel 87)

Sorel refers to the state resulting from such “irrationality” as “decadent” and “degenerate,” and thus we have another clear parallel with Mailer’s idea of “the plague,” as in both cases we observe an attenuation of fundamental and essential conflicts.

My own extrapolation from Sorel’s idea is as follows. Someone acting in such a context and with such an understanding of how things work, he offers: would they not possibly come to believe that (please remember our second paradox) the best strategy of attaining their goals might be propping up the enemy? And is exactly this not an important part of Mailer’s strategy in the whole Goldwater affair and beyond? I am referring to all those ideas running through his 1960s work, about restoring a true Conservatism to its lost potency, so that a vital and drastic confrontation with the Left can be ensured. What is, perhaps, the best example of the paradoxical positions resulting from such an equally paradoxical attitude can be found in Mailer’s speech at the debate with William Buckley, Jr. There, what we might call a “freedom-loving” brand of Conservatism is pitted against a “Totalitarian” one and the Cold War itself is denounced as a sort of senseless distraction from another war that would be “welcome”: “the war which has meaning, that great and mortal debate between rebel and conservative where each would argue the other is an agent of the Devil” (*Presidential Papers* 187–8).

Sorel’s own solution for reinforcing the essential antagonism between the middle and working classes is the employment of proletarian violence. The social peacemakers’ advances, we are told, must be met with “black ingratitude” and blows. The paradox here is that such violence will prevent more

virulent and abhorrent violence on a grander scale. For a revolution erupting in the midst of capitalist decadence would, according to Sorel, lead either to a regression to barbarism and/or anarchy, or to “the dictatorship of the proletariat.” The latter represents Sorel’s worst nightmare, since by this term he understands a revolution led by his unconscionable opponents, the “parliamentary” Socialists, and that revolution would be destined to repeat the worst excesses of the French Revolution.

Thus we are brought to the final resemblance between Mailer and Sorel, the idea that a form of limited violence can work to prevent what may be properly called “totalitarian” violence, which is organized violence on a massive scale employing the resources of the State. In fact, Sorel goes so far as to propose that, to avoid misunderstandings, we call all violence of this second type “force” and retain the term “violence” for all oppositional (notably, of course, proletarian) violent acts:

Sometimes the terms *force* and *violence* are used in speaking of acts of authority, sometimes in speaking of acts of revolt . . . I think it would be better to adopt a terminology which would give rise to no ambiguity, and that the term *violence* should be employed only for acts of revolt; we should say, therefore, that the object of force is to impose a certain social order in which the minority governs, while violence tends to the destruction of that order. The middle class have used force since the beginning of modern times, while the proletariat now reacts against the middle class and against the State by violence. (Sorel 195)

This distinction between “force” and “violence” is one Mailer essentially shared with Sorel.

Let us, briefly, recapitulate our main points. Totalitarianism can be approached not only as “a system” but also as a discourse whose logic confuses political sides. A thinker operating within the framework of this discourse is bound, by dint of its logic, to get entangled within a certain political paradoxology, which is conducive to the formulation of highly idiosyncratic positions such as Mailer’s “Left Conservatism.” Indeed our central preoccupation throughout has been with the question, “How is a Left Conservative produced?” In response to this question we proposed a principle and highlighted what might initially appear as a certain conceptual “mech-

anism.” The principle is that opposition to totalitarianism will often turn out to be itself, *de facto*, totalitarian or potentially totalitarian. Between the two opposed “totalitarianisms,” then, the distinction between Left and Right will tend to be attenuated if not erased. The “mechanism” we termed, with the help of Jean Radford’s old but still very interesting study on Mailer, the *politique du pire*.

The *politique du pire*, being a policy (and hence a mechanism), could be initially approached in tactical or strategic terms as the idea that the tactical aggravation of oppression, exploitation, conflict (but therefore also the preservation in good shape of one’s opponent) will bring a strategic goal of revolution even closer. However, on closer inspection it turns out that, in the case of both Mailer and Sorel, whatever tactical or strategic deliberations might there be, the “mechanism” also actually conceals a principle. In Mailer’s characteristic terms, acute, inflammatory diseases are healthier than lingering, silent ones. The metaphor points to a rather complex economy of violence. We dealt with one of its facets, the opposition of subjective to objective violence. Placated once, subjective, visible, symptomatic violence feeds, through accumulation, into objective or better still, in our case, “totalitarian” violence. However, the two principles here interlock. The bearer of liberated subjective violence, the hipster, is himself potentially amenable to the call of a “magnetic leader” with visions of “mass murder.” We are still in the cycle of “totalitarianism.”

NOTES

1. Mailer discusses politics as property in Part Two, Chapter Six, of *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*.
2. Mailer’s essay is included in *Cannibals and Christians*.
3. See the “Prefatory Paper” entitled “Heroes and Leaders.”

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