

# A POLITICAL PARADOX:

## *“Totalitarianism,” Myth, and Norman Mailer’s Left Conservatism*

ALEXANDROS MANTZARIS

IF ONE NEEDED TO CAPTURE IN A NUTSHELL THE ECCENTRICITY or what perhaps we could even call the downright oddity of American author Norman Mailer’s political stance during the tumultuous 1960s, one could surely do worse than point to his well-known characterization of himself as a Left Conservative. In what follows I wish to discuss this intriguing as much as paradoxical position, exploring not only what it means to be, but also how one becomes, a conservative on the Left or a Leftist of the conservative variety—exploring, that is, how a Left Conservative ideology functions. In doing so, I mean to contribute to a better understanding of Mailer’s work but also hope to bring to the fore an interesting question or two regarding the stability of political categorisations (Left, Right, Center) that are sometimes taken for granted. To this effect, I will also refer to a couple of common pre-occupations not just of Mailer himself but also his critics, namely “Totalitarianism” and Myth. A few remarks on our three central terms are, therefore, in order.

### **“TOTALITARIANISM”**

There are two aspects to the broader problematic of “Totalitarianism” between which it would be useful to distinguish. This distinction is tentative and primarily use-oriented but important in terms of the subsequent analysis, so the following outline is meant to make it clearer:

**(The Problem of) ‘Totalitarianism’****The Discourse of (i.e. about)  
‘Totalitarianism’**

A discourse whose logic confuses political ‘sides’ (left, right, centre) and therefore destabilises ‘standard’ political antagonisms:

- Convergence of (political) opposites
- Plasticity of political/ideological oppositions
- Ideological ambivalence

**The Phenomenon of  
‘Totalitarianism’:**

Certain political regimes and/or types of socio-political organisation, called ‘totalitarian’, to which are attributed a number of (shared) characteristics, such as:

- One-party rule
  - Uncontested official ideology
  - Monopolised mass communications
- Also (from a more literary/imaginal perspective such as Mailer’s):
- Suppression of the past
  - Suppression of myth
  - Imposition of cowardly conformity
- 

As my outline illustrates, when speaking of “totalitarianism” one could take two different courses depending on whether one takes the term to refer, on the one hand, to an ensemble of historically situated socio-political regimes sharing a number of distinct features or, on the other, to a particular discourse with a certain logic the bottom line of which is a certain idea about the common ground between Left and Right. In other words, what one talks about when talking about “totalitarianism” is contingent on whether “totalitarianism” is viewed as a neutral term describing a certain “system” or, to put it bluntly, as an ideological construct aiming to place the two main enemies of Western-type democracy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in a single category.<sup>2</sup> In the first case, one would have to refer to such traits as the rule by a single party and (from a more literary perspective) to such functions as the suppression of the past. In the second case it would be necessary to discuss the sheer ideological confusion that the idea of converging opposites produces and indeed try to explain its plausibility. Let me be a little more specific. The reader might still wonder what exactly the argument that the “discourse” of totalitarianism undermines standard political oppositions means. Simply put, it means that when one indicates that the USSR and Nazi regimes were fundamentally identical (and this is the basic point of most theories of totalitarianism) one is confusing Left and Right. For one does tend to place Communism and Nazism on opposite ends of the political

spectrum. This confusion is naturally intensified when one includes, as did Mailer, American Democracy in this schema.

When discussing totalitarianism, Mailer critics usually refer to what we called above the historical “phenomenon”—that is, a “system” with certain characteristics. Although there is much to be said in this area (and quite a lot has of course been said), it is for certain equally productive to approach totalitarianism as a “discourse” perpetuating the political confusion that produces it in the first place.

### **LEFT CONSERVATISM**

It is important to note in passing that although Left Conservatism does not seem to be consciously adopted as a stance until a later stage in Mailer’s career, it is already there as, so to speak, a tendency or a tension from its very start. Although, in other words, the term only appears for the first time in Mailer’s celebrated non-fiction novel of 1968, *The Armies of the Night*, the contradiction it represents is already informing Mailer’s work in his first novel of twenty years earlier. Mailer, however, is not the only writer whose peculiar ideological complexion concerns us here. At this point let us introduce Mailer’s fellow Left Conservative, Georges Sorel (1847-1922), a French theorist of anarcho-syndicalism. His best-known work, *Reflections on Violence*, from which I will quote, was published in 1908. The reader will see Sorel’s Left Conservatism in action, as it were, but the following quote from an Isaiah Berlin essay should give an idea of the basis for the comparison to Mailer:

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)

Clearly, the reference to the lack of a “fixed position” and, in particular, to an alternating process of claiming and repudiation on the part of both the Right and the Left point us in the direction of Left Conservatism.

### **MYTH**

Among the positions for which Sorel is known was the one according to which (political) myths are important in the development and ultimate suc-

cess of socio-political movements. More specifically, Sorel claimed that what he called the myth of an oncoming general strike could effectively consolidate and mobilise the (French) proletariat and ensure the victory of a proletarian revolution. In effect we are speaking of a myth of embattlement or an embattled myth here, the potential of which Sorel forcefully argued for. Political mythology, then, is our third basic concept.

#### **POLITICAL MYTH, LEFT CONSERVATISM, TOTALITARIANISM**

Joseph Wenke is one of the Mailer critics who has tended to approach Totalitarianism as what we called “a system” (albeit one with a certain “{spirit}”) accorded certain characteristics. He has argued that one of the essential functions of this system is to suppress and neutralise heroic Myth:

[...] one of the major objectives of totalitarianism, as Mailer defines it, is to divorce human beings from their connection to the past. Both history and the myths that would express the culture’s origins, values and purpose are denied, reduced to cliché, or turned into nationalistic propaganda, leaving us all rootless, our attention fixed only upon the ephemeral pleasures and pains of the present. (Wenke, 13)

Indeed, in the first chapter of his study Wenke talks a lot about Totalitarianism as a disconnection from the American Myth of courage, risk-taking and individual “growth,” a myth, according to him, that Mailer sought to revive. What I want to do then, as a way of bringing our three main concepts into mutual relief, is to examine Wenke’s assertion regarding the excision of Myth by Totalitarianism.

In his open letter to Fidel Castro, written in 1960, Mailer lauded Castro’s rise to power in these terms:

Back in December, 1956, you landed near Niquero in the Oriente of Cuba with 82 men and a few arms. Your plan was to ignite an insurrection which would rid Cuba of Batista in a few weeks. Instead, you were to lose all but 12 of these men in the first few days, you were to wander through fields and forests in the dark, without real food or water, living on sugar-cane for five days and five nights. In the depth of this disaster, you were to announce to

the few men still with you: “The days of the dictatorship are numbered.” [...] It was not unheroic. Truth, it was worthy of Cortes. It was as if the ghost of Cortes had appeared in our century riding Zapata’s white horse. You were the first and greatest hero to appear in the world since the Second War. (Mailer, ‘Open Letter’ 81–2, 82)

This elegy to Castro in juxtaposition to Kennedy (who is, of course, the other, indeed the main, “hero” of *Presidential Papers*, albeit dethroned by the time of the letters’ composition) and it contains many elements useful for our present purposes.

In an early but still very interesting study of Mailer’s work, Jean Radford cited the above passage and commented on it as follows:

The political inappropriateness of the comparison is glaringly obvious—and there is, apparently, no ironic intention. The idealist liberator turned Communist is compared with the Spanish conquistador whose brutal and brutalising search for gold and converts was one of the first examples of the colonial exploitation from which Cuba suffered right up to the time of the Batista regime. He then draws on the legend of the Mexican revolutionary and his white horse—which became a symbol of the revolutionary struggle against colonial oppression. To imagine the ghost of Cortes riding Zapata’s white horse is itself a gross contradiction in terms; Castro, Cortes and Zapata are all vulgarly lumped together as examples of Latin American heroes. What Mailer is saluting is again the virtue of ‘courage’ and he subsumes all political distinctions in his obsession with this quality. (Radford, 66)

Radford’s comment is accompanied by a note, on the same page, which reads:

It seems possible that Mailer knows Cortes as the *mythologised* ‘stout Cortes’ of Keats’ poem—and that he shares the nineteenth century poetic view of him. (Radford, 66, italics mine)

It is certainly an interesting question just what sort of standards would enable us to place two figures (leaving Zapata out of this) so far removed, temporally, as Castro and Cortes on opposite sides or camps, the way Radford demands and for the failure to do that for which she criticises Mailer. The answer would seem to go somewhat like this: it is basically a panoramic, diachronic view of history containing some sort of division of historical forces and events into reactionary (colonialism—Cortes) and progressive (anti-colonialism—Castro) that would enable one to do what Radford does. Leaving aside the possible objection that such an projected antagonism might give rise to—namely that it is based on an anachronism (for after all Cortes does seem to be subjected to criteria not applicable to his era), Radford's observation calls forth the obverse sort of question. That is, what kind of criteria enable Mailer to “vulgarly” lump together Castro, Cortes (and Zapata) in a way that almost seems symmetrically the opposite of Radford's? Clearly, whereas Radford employs a historical continuity to draw her “political distinctions,” Mailer “subsumes” these under what would have to be termed a mythological continuity.

Unfortunately, although she nods in that direction with her references to heroes, “courage” and, in particular, to a Romantic, “mythologized” view of Cortes, Radford does not take the step from detecting (and lamenting) the contradiction to actually trying to account for it. For, at the end of the day, and irrespective of any partial objections, one would have to grant her point. She was indeed right to find a paradox in Mailer's alignment of Castro with Cortes. What she does not really seem to recognize, however, is that it is precisely the paradox of Left Conservatism that we see here. It is important to note that the imaginative effacement of political antagonisms criticized by Radford is not (as she seems to believe) the result of Mailer's eccentricity, a lack of adequate historical knowledge or of an unsophisticated analysis. Rather it is the result of this very myth of courage. What one observes here is the function of Myth.

This, then, is the core of our argument in summary. First, the framework: an analysis, or discussion, of the “system” of totalitarianism, or even the identification of such a system's existence, will tend to activate the logic of the “discourse” of “totalitarianism”—a “Left Conservative” type of logic fostering profound political confusion. Second, regarding the case at hand, while Myth is supposedly suppressed by totalitarian systems, the main function of (political) Myth, such as that of “courage” employed by Mailer, is actually

complementary to that of discourse of totalitarianism (or the totalitarian discourse) is so far as both tend to eradicate standard political distinctions or oppositions. One, however, might still be unclear as to where exactly the concept of Totalitarianism comes in, in our discussion of Myth so far.

Here we find the irony of Mailer's use of a heroic lineage stretching from Cortes to Castro. For the whole point of adopting this sort of confusing political mythology is to enable the author to imaginatively envision a stance in opposition to totalitarian forces. The open letter delineates very cogently what the author saw as the central characteristics of American "Totalitarianism," the heroism of the Castro revolution being presented as an inspiration, a counterweight to this 'tyranny one breathed but could not define':

By law we had a free press; almost no one spoke his thoughts. By custom we had a free ballot; was there ever a choice? [. . .] You were aiding us [. . .] in that desperate silent struggle we had been fighting with sick dead hearts against the cold insidious cancer of the power that governs us, you were giving us new blood to fight our mass communications, our police, our secret police, our corporations, our empty politicians, our clergymen, our editors, our cold frightened bewildered bullies who govern a machine made out of people they no longer understand, you were giving us hope they would not always win. (Mailer, 'Open Letter' 84)

From cancer to the mass media, this is indeed a pretty comprehensive list of the components making up, in Mailer's view, the American variety of the type of system we are discussing. So, to repeat, in opposition to a totalitarian system Mailer conjures up a political myth replicating the essential function of the discourse of totalitarianism.

An antinomy rather similar to the one above seems to be at work in Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*. As mentioned, one of Sorel's main arguments in that work is that social movements and/or entities engaged in a struggle are in need of a myth that will solidify them, sustain morale through downturns and, in general, contribute to the success of their efforts. We are speaking of the sort of myth of valiant and decisive struggle against a potent enemy, a myth very similar indeed to that constructed by Mailer. But let us look at some of the examples Sorel gives of past movements or projects

which benefited (as he hoped the anarchosyndicalist and, more generally, the proletarian movement would) from just such a myth of embattlement and courage in the face of adversity:

The hopes that Luther and Calvin had formed of the religious exaltation of Europe were by no means realised; very quickly these fathers of the Reformation seemed men of a past era; for present-day Protestants they belong rather to the Middle Ages than the modern times, and the problems which troubled them most occupy very little place in contemporary Protestantism. Must we for that reason deny the immense result that came from their dreams of Christian renovation? (Sorel, 115)

Here is the second case of successful mythmaking adduced by Sorel:

I could have given one more example which is perhaps even more striking: Catholics have never been discouraged even in the hardest trials, because they have pictured the history of the Church as a series of battles between Satan and the hierarchy supported by Christ: every new difficulty that arises is an episode in this war which must finally end in the victory of Catholicism. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the revolutionary persecutions revived this myth of the struggle with Satan [...] This rejuvenation explains to a large extent the religious renewal which took place at that time. If Catholicism is so under threat today it is largely owing to the fact that the myth of the Church militant is tending to disappear. (Sorel, 20–21)

Although it may somewhat encumber the economy of our argument, one cannot resist mentioning a third example presented by the author of *Reflections*:

We can readily admit that the real developments of the Revolution did not in any way resemble the enchanting pictures which created the enthusiasm of its first adherents; but without those pictures would the Revolution have been victorious? The myth was heavily mixed up with utopias [...] These utopias came to

nothing; but it may be asked if the Revolution was not a much more profound transformation than those dreamed of by the people who in the eighteenth century had invented social utopias. (Sorel, 115–6)

Thus, the three paradigms brought together are those of the French Revolution, the Reformation and the Catholic Church! This is done with little regard for their differences (to put it mildly)—with no regard, in truth, for the fact that the struggles facilitated by the respective “myths” of those forces were, in some cases, struggles *against each other*. As in our example from Mailer, that is to say, fundamental, historic antagonisms of a political nature are suppressed courtesy of Myth. Now, one might object that Sorel is just giving examples which need not be consistent—there is no real contradiction here. But I do not think that is true. In fact what is happening is that even as he is giving examples of political projects well served by a myth of embattlement, Sorel is constructing his own political mythology which en-folds these examples as precedents to the proletarian revolution. In other words, a line of sorts is again established here. As in Mailer we have Cortes/Zapata/Castro (with Cortes, as Jean Radford notes, being the odd one out), so here (leaving the French Revolution out for the sake of simplicity) we have the “Church militant,” the Reformation and Anarchosyndicalism the oddity being both the alignment of Catholicism to the Reformation but also, arguably, the alignment of both to anarchosyndicalism.

Here is a similar example from *Reflections*. For Sorel, the problem of the transition to socialism was very much a moral one (and indeed the paradoxical lineage we saw being proposed above was perhaps more than anything else representative of a moral connection). An essential function of the myth of the general strike would be to cultivate an ethic that would bring workers up to the requirements of a society of free associated producers. Sorel discusses this issue in the final chapter of *Reflections*. There he argues that the worker’s ethic that will promote and hold together a free society (that is, a society rid of all employers) will need to incorporate something of the ethic of the Homeric hero (for the analysis of which ethic he draws heavily on Nietzsche). Interestingly, Sorel saw the modern embodiment of the Homeric ethic in the settlers of the American West:

I believe that if Nietzsche had not been so dominated by his memories of being a professor of philology, he would have perceived that the *master* type still exists under our own eyes, and that it is this type which, at the present time, creates the extraordinary greatness of the United States; he would have been struck by the analogies which exist between the Yankee, ready for any kind of enterprise, and the ancient Greek sailor, sometimes a pirate, sometimes a colonist or a merchant; above all, he would have established a parallel between the ancient heroes and the man who sets out to conquer the Far West. (Sorel, 232)

A few observations are called for. First, one must remember the importance in *The Presidential Papers* of the myth of the West and its concomitant, the implicit lamentation of the “closing of the frontier,” but also the not quite unoriginal treatment this latter, rather trite, theme receives therein—though the Homeric connection would seem to have escaped Mailer who speaks instead (albeit in equally Nietzschean terms) of the perseverance, in America, of “the dynamic myth of the Renaissance”:

Simply, America was the land where people still believed in heroes [...] It was a country which had grown by the leap of one hero past another [...] And when the West was filled, the expansion turned inward, became part of an agitated, overexcited, superheated dream life. The film studios threw up their searchlights as the frontier was finally sealed, and the romantic possibilities of the old conquest of land turned into a vertical myth, trapped within the skull, of a new kind of heroic life, each choosing his own archetype of a neo-renaissance man [...] And this myth, that each of us was born to be free, to wander, to have adventure and to grow on the waves of the violent, the perfumed, and the unexpected, had a force which could not be tamed no matter how the nation’s regulators—politicians, medicos, policemen, professors, priests, rabbis, ministers, *ideologues*, psychoanalysts, builders, executives and endless communicators—would brick-in the modern life with hygiene upon sanity, and middle-brow homily over platitude; the myth would not die. (Mailer, ‘Existential Hero’ 52–3)

Once more, of course, we see Myth mobilized against the familiar parataxis of totalitarian “regulators.” What is noteworthy, though, is the way Myth pushes one in the direction of Left Conservatism, or indeed produces the Left Conservative. First, in the case of Mailer, this insistence on the heroic necessitates the avoidance of a more standard, leftist view of Hollywood as a manufacturer of conformity and acquiescence. Instead of the familiar line on Hollywood brainwashing we have a view of an industry mired in contradiction—fuelling a subversive (always according to Mailer of course) heroic mythology as part of proceeding with business as usual. Interestingly, then, at the same time that ‘the media’ (primarily, of course, television) are held up as the totalitarian instrument *par excellence*, cinema appears, at least in part, exempt from this sort of polemic.

Second, with both Sorel and Mailer, we have a rather paradoxical lauding of a colonizing project, of two, one might well say, “epics”—in the first case that of the pioneers and in the second (to stick to our original example) that of the conquistadors—from what nevertheless purports to remain an essentially leftist perspective. We cannot go into details regarding the deflation of such legends nor do we have to. That the Westward expansion (and many another colonial adventure) have been progressively denuded of their mythic or heroic qualities is not a point that needs belabouring. What should be observed is that this process had perhaps already started in Sorel’s time and was certainly under way by the time of *The Presidential Papers*. That is remarkable because the political subjects invested with the symbolic resonance of this frankly reactionary mythology are the rebellious proletarian or anarchosyndicalist, in Sorel’s case, and Castro and his comrades, in that of Mailer. Again, it would perhaps be too easy to attribute this to ignorance, political naivety or something of the kind. It is rather Left Conservatism in action that one observes here. But was this refilling of hollowed vessels or forms, this recharging of spent faiths, not a trait of (at least some) historical, totalitarian movement(s) (which one should again be careful not to confuse with the discourse(s) of totalitarianism)?

Let us proceed in the same vein. As stated, Sorel was certain that this Homeric ethic (or at least some modified version) would be indispensable to the future society of free, associated workers:

I am not among those who consider Homer’s Achaean type, the indomitable hero [...] as necessarily disappearing in the future.

If this has often been believed, it is because the Homeric values were imagined to be irreconcilable with other values which spring from an entirely different principle; Nietzsche committed this error which all those who believe in the necessity of unity in thought are bound to make. It is quite evident that liberty would be seriously compromised if men came to regard the Homeric values [...] as suitable only to barbaric peoples. Many moral evils would prevent humanity from progressing if some hero of revolt did not force the people to examine its conscience; and art, which is after all of some value, would lose the finest jewel in its crown. (Sorel 233)

The preservation of this superior morality, or this morality of the superior, would be achieved with the aid of the Myth of the oncoming general strike—a myth whose power would be amplified with each new “wildcat” strike. In his discussion of Nietzsche, however, Sorel, also refers to two more instances of individuals, of intellectual leaders somewhat like Nietzsche one might say, whom he sees as bearers and preservers of the Homeric Spirit in modern times. Once more the examples are, interestingly, drawn from the American scene and again these examples are rather striking:

J[ean] Bourdeau has drawn attention to the strange likeness which exists between the ideas of A[ndrew] Carnegie and [Theodore] Roosevelt and those of Nietzsche, the first deploring the waste of money in maintaining the incapable, the second urging Americans to become conquerors, a race of prey. (Sorel 233)

What makes Sorel’s choices even more noteworthy is that Carnegie was famous for violently suppressing strikes in his steelworks and Roosevelt for persecuting political dissenters, in particular anarchists. That they should be, therefore, singled out as holders of a celebrated Nietzschean spirit by Sorel, an anarchist and a theorist of the general strike to boot, is perhaps a little perplexing.

Irrespectively of such details which simply add an extra ironic touch, the central contradiction here is that the ethical code of a future proletarian society rid of capitalist “bosses” and their political representatives would have, according to Sorel, to be an extension (at least in part) of the ethic of those

very bosses and representatives. Again, in other words, insurmountable socio-political antagonisms (indeed the class struggle itself, one might say) are suspended, through some very curious manoeuvring, by a sort of mythic continuity.

One may now ask how the concept of totalitarianism relates to this whole schema. One should be careful because the term itself is not used by Sorel and it is unlikely that he would have been aware of it or any very similar term. Still, it is clear when one reads *Reflections* that the whole problematic of totalitarianism (even if not by that name) was very much in Sorel's mind. The primary threat to proletarian emancipation is represented, in Sorel, by the "politicians," the "parliamentary socialists" who would use the proletarian movement for their own ends. Along these lines the genuine, so to speak, "proletarian general strike" is contrasted to the "political general strike" which would lead to a mere change of masters. Indeed the way Sorel envisions the outcome of a drive led by politicians is surely not without relevance to what we usually think of when hearing the term totalitarianism:

The strengthening of the state is at the basis of all their conceptions; in the organizations which they at present control, the politicians are already preparing the framework of a strong, centralized and disciplined authority, which will not be hampered by the criticism of an opposition, which will be able to enforce silence and which will give currency to its lies. (Sorel 162)

And if this sounds a little too much like a "simple" dictatorship as opposed to one of the totalitarian varieties, one could cite instances where Sorel seems to envision a regime qualitatively different from autocratic precedents:

It is even possible that, since the transmission of authority operates nowadays in a more perfect fashion, thanks to the new resources at the disposal of the parliamentary system, and since the proletariat would be thoroughly well organized under the official *syndicats*, we should see the social revolution culminate in a wonderful system of slavery. (Sorel 165)

In other words, Sorel was able to grasp ahead of time one of the essential aspects of totalitarianism which those later developing the relevant theories

would present as proof of its alleged uniqueness—availing itself of modern communication media. How was this disastrous development to be averted, then, but also what were the conditions conducive to it? Here one enters the heart of Sorel's thinking about violence and myth—which is pretty much the same since the myth of the general strike is a violent myth, a myth dependent on violence. In a sense the answer to the first question is simple. The way to prevent the success of a “political” (in Sorel's derogatory use of the term) revolution, is to ensure the victory of a “proletarian” revolution. The main obstacle to this is not, interestingly enough, a weakness on the proletarian side but quite the contrary. As he explains in the *Reflections*' second chapter, which alludes to the root of the problem in its very title, the even progression of the proletarian movement is undermined by what, at first sight, might appear like a cause for celebration, namely the “decadence of the bourgeoisie,” a decadence manifested in its unwillingness to energetically and forcefully pursue its own best interests and its opting for the preservation of an intolerable equanimity. We shall not go into details of how this decadent preference for calm and quietude paves the way for a dreaded “dictatorship of the proletariat” headed by the parliamentary socialists or else to downright barbarism—there are some additional considerations involved and it would perhaps not be unfair to say that Sorel himself does not seem very clear about the connections between the various factors and eventualities. Suffice it to say that, for Sorel, the main danger lies in the pursuit, on either side, of social peace or, to remember Mailer, in the endless compromises of a liberal center. Indeed, readers of Mailer who encounter Sorel's ideas about decadence and degeneration are likely to remember the role played in the former author's work by cancer, the plague and other diseases of a pacified social body. For both, what we might now call the totalitarian syndrome entails not so much coercion, repression and violence but rather *the absence* of these things. From this slightly turned angle, also, one may be able to better understand Sorel's half-admiring references to energetic business leaders such as Andrew Carnegie.

So, Sorel felt that he had detected a disease whose main symptom was a blurring of standard distinctions, a dilution of vigorous hostility, the mitigation of essential antagonisms. The remedy would be a violent myth channelling raw proletarian energy into unapologetic and progressively more violent action, a violence one of the main objectives of which would be to bolster a degenerate enemy restoring to him his lost vitality—to breed, that

is, more violence. Somewhere here, however, we run into the same ironic circularity that we saw in Mailer. The “anti-totalitarian” aim of the Sorelian myth would be to reinstate vibrant oppositions. But as already demonstrated the actual function, or as it were the logic, of myth (and indeed of Sorel’s own mythical genealogy) is to suppress actual, given oppositions, and in this it mirrors the logic of what we called the discourse of “totalitarianism.”

To conclude, then, it is possible to argue, as we saw in Joseph Wenke, that Totalitarianism “denies” or suppresses Myth and that Myth can therefore be mobilised against it, provided that one approaches Totalitarianism as a system, and that one adopts a rather limited view of this latter at that—for, as we saw, thinkers like Sorel and Mailer could find in a totalitarian (or potentially totalitarian) system attributes that could perhaps be seen as analogous to those we reserved for what we distinguished as the “discourse” rather than the system. So when, on the other hand, one approaches Totalitarianism from a different angle and sees it as a discourse destabilising ‘standard’ political oppositions or as a “syndrome” defusing social and political contradiction, one realizes that this, its main function, is not merely compatible but perhaps identical with that of political Myth. From this perspective, rather than being at odds, Totalitarianism and Myth are veritably coextensive principles of political confusion.

#### NOTE

1. The problematic and contestable nature of the term “totalitarianism” is the reason I have been qualifying it with quotation marks. To keep this practice from becoming tiresome I will refrain from doing it further. It is to be understood, however, that the quotation marks remain around the word.

#### WORKS CITED

- Berlin, Isaiah. “Georges Sorel.” *Against the Current*. London: Hogarth Press, 1979. Print.
- Lewis, Wyndham. *The Art of Being Ruled*. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1989. Print.
- Mailer, Norman. *The Armies of the Night*. New York: Signet Books, 1968. Print.
- . “An Open Letter to John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Fidel Castro.” *The Presidential Papers*. Frogmore, Herts: Panther, 1976. Print.
- . “The Existential Hero.” *The Presidential Papers*. Frogmore, Herts.: 1976. Print.
- Radford, Jean. *Norman Mailer: A Critical Study*. London: Macmillan, 1975. Print.
- Sorel, Georges. *Reflections on Violence*, Trans. T. E. Hulme. Ed. Jeremy Jennings. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print.
- Wenke, Joseph. *Mailer’s America*. Hanover: UP of New England, 1987. Print.