
Series, Group, Colony: The Concrete Universal in Sartre and Fanon

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Finally, there is one question—only one: Do we have today the means
to constitute a structural, historical anthropology?
– Jean-Paul Sartre in the preface to *Search for a Method*

Decolonization never goes unnoticed, for it focuses on and fundamentally alters
being, and transforms the spectator crushed to a nonessential state into a privileged
actor, captured in a virtually grandiose fashion by the spotlight of History.
– Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*

At first blush, these two epigraphs appear very different from one another. Sartre's question is a theoretical one, prefacing a text laying out a philosophical methodology for Marxism, seemingly in the abstract, while Fanon's observation is based on direct action and the events of the Algerian war of independence, pinpointing the existential precipitate of a concrete and bloody process: decolonization. However, these projects are intimately linked. Both Sartre and Fanon identify features of human relations that affect us at a fundamental level. Additionally, both philosophers explicitly aim to conceptualize the relationship between, on one side, the universal dimensions of social structure and historical becoming and, on the other side, the singularity of a concrete individual life, bound to myriad collectives and groups through processes that far exceed it. The overall objective of the course is to take us through these two philosophers' political and philosophical projects in order to arrive at an articulation of a concrete universal, a conception of group-formation that does not stand above or apart from particular groups but exists only in and through them and, crucially, through their internal fractures, contradictions, and failures. In this frame, Sartre and Fanon are certainly not opposed; read in conjunction, they offer a window onto a new way of conceptualizing the social, the historical, the political, and the existential dimensions of our epoch. They offer, in short, an unwritten theory of group-formation and collective life.

On this course, we will move in three stages. We begin with Sartre's initial question and his method, which he lays out in *Search for a Method*: why a sclerotic Marxism cannot reach the concrete individual, and how the mediations of psychoanalysis and sociology, together with the progressive-regressive method, let us read a singular life or work as the totalization of its epoch. We then follow him, in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, as he traces a dialectic of the collective, from seriality—the queue, the market, the impotence of the anonymous and the interchangeable in a social structure—to the group-in-fusion, the many welded into a single praxis, and on to his analysis of racism and colonialism, equipped with his method and motifs. Finally, we turn to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. For Fanon, decolonizing violence is the act by which the colonized make themselves a people. This text closes on an enigmatic chapter made up of clinical cases: "Colonial War and Mental Disorders." We will read these cases for the collective formation they exhibit, bringing our knowledge of Sartre, Fanon, and psychoanalysis—to wit, a form of psychoanalysis neither thinker had on hand—to bear on these testimonies of collective suffering.

The wager of the course is that the colonial is not a late application of a theory worked out in a European elsewhere. Rather, the colony is the site where the structure of the group becomes legible. This is the destination we will be moving toward: extracted from Fanon's clinical cases, the colonial group shows itself as a concrete universal, the exceptional formation in which the conditions of group formation as such come into view. Fanon does not merely illustrate Sartre but concretizes and completes him. In closing there, the course raises a question: What ultimately binds the colonial group? This presses beyond Sartre and Fanon's texts toward psychoanalysis, a discipline to which both thinkers lack a straightforward relation.

Date & Time	Session Title	Description & Aim	Reading
15. 10. 2026	Marxism and/or Existentialism?	A lecture and discussion on the opening essay of <i>Search for a Method</i> . Sartre affirms Marxism as the “unsurpassable philosophy” of the age and demotes existentialism to an “ideology,” a parasitic enclave on its margin. Yet contemporary Marxism, he argues, has grown sclerotic: it dissolves the concrete individual into a priori universals and so cannot grasp the reality it claims to explain. Existentialism’s task is to make Marxism recover the concrete, which demands a method that Marxism itself lacks. Our aim is to understand how Sartre conceptualizes both Marxism’s object and Marxism itself.	Sartre, “Marxism and Existentialism” in <i>Search for a Method</i> , trans. Hazel E. Barnes (1968, Knopf): pp. 3–34.
22. 10. 2026	Human Relations and Collectives: Psychoanalysis, Sociology, and Marxism	A lecture and discussion on “The Problem of Mediations.” Sartre argues that contemporary Marxism, though sound in principle, has come to know in advance what it ought to discover: it dissolves the concrete individual into the universal (class, the mode of production) and so never reaches the singular. What it lacks is a hierarchy of mediations between general conditions and a particular life as it is lived. Sartre supplies them through two auxiliary disciplines: psychoanalysis and sociology. Neither rivals Marxism, on his account; both furnish the mediations that let it become concrete (with some caveats). Our aim is to understand why Sartre maintains that Marxism must take up psychoanalysis and sociology as mediating disciplines.	Excerpt from “The Problem of Mediations” in <i>Search for a Method</i> : pp. 54–84. (We begin with the paragraph that opens: “But the problem concerns Valéry.”)
5. 11. 2026	From the Singular to the Universal: Sartre’s Progressive-Regressive Method	A lecture and discussion on “The Progressive-Regressive Method,” where Sartre sets out the method his investigation requires. It works in two moments. The regressive moment moves analytically back from an act, a work, or a life to the objective conditions and mediations that make it possible; the progressive moment moves forward, following the project by which the individual totalizes those conditions and surpasses them toward a future. So read, the singular is neither dissolved into its conditions nor cut free of them. This is the method of the whole <i>Critique</i> , and the one the course will later examine in relation to Fanon’s political analysis and clinical cases. Our aim is to trace the progressive-regressive method: how it reads a singular life or work as at once conditioned by its epoch and a totalization of it.	Excerpt from “The Progressive-Regressive Method” in <i>Search for a Method</i> : pp. 85–111. (We stop right before the second section of this chapter.)
19. 11. 2026	Seriality: The Queue, Gatherings, and Impotence as a Bond	A lecture and discussion on “Collectives” in Sartre’s <i>Critique of Dialectical Reason</i> , where he analyses the series: the mode in which people are gathered yet held apart, each interchangeable with the next. To belong to a series is to be anyone and no one in particular. Here universality appears in its inert form, the many dissolved into serial sameness rather than gathered into a common act. Our aim is to grasp Sartre’s conceptualization of seriality, both as an inert form of universality and as a feature of social structures.	Excerpt from Sartre, “Collectives” in <i>Critique of Dialectical Reason</i> , trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (1982, Verso): pp. 253–86. (We are reading the first three sections of this chapter.)

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3. 12. 2026	The Group-in-Fusion: The Genesis of Groups, the Bastille, and the Third Party	A lecture and discussion on “The Fused Group,” where Sartre shows the series dissolving, under a common danger, into a group: at the Bastille, the dispersed become a single praxis. His key figure is the third party (le tiers), the member who, in acting, totalizes the whole group from within, so that each is no longer interchangeable with the others, as in the series, but identical to them in one common action. The group is thus a collective that acts as one, a many that is a single praxis. Our aim is to trace Sartre’s argument for how a series becomes a group, and to grasp his notion of the group-in-fusion as a collective singularity.	Excerpt from “The Fused Group” in Critique of Dialectical Reason: pp. 345–73. (We are reading the first three sections of this chapter.)
10. 12. 2026	Between Seriality and Group: Colonialism and Racism	A lecture and discussion on “The Place of History,” where Sartre turns the whole apparatus onto a concrete historical formation. He first shows that groups and collectives are not separate orders but reciprocally condition one another, then reads racism and colonialism as at once a praxis and a process: the colonists’ intentional project on one side, and on the other, an impersonal process of exploitation. Colonialism is thus the case, for Sartre, in which group and series, the singular act and the anonymous process, are locked together. Our aim is to reconstruct Sartre’s analysis of racism and colonialism as at once praxis and process.	Excerpts from “The Place of History” in Critique of Dialectical Reason: pp. 664 –70, 716–34. (We are reading the first and fifth sections of this chapter.)
7. 1. 2027	he Genesis of a Peculiar Group: Colonization, Decolonization, and Violence	A lecture and discussion on the opening of “On Violence” in Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth. Fanon describes the colonial world as Manichaeian, split in two. Decolonization, for Fanon, is the praxis through which the colonized weld themselves into a people. However, this differs from Sartre’s analysis of the colonial situation in Critique of Dialectical Reason. Our aim is to understand Fanon’s argument that decolonizing violence is an act of self-universalization and to set his conceptualization of colonized collectives and decolonizing groups beside Sartre’s notions of seriality and the group-in-fusion.	Excerpt from Fanon, “On Violence” in The Wretched of the Earth, trans. Richard Philcox (2004, Grove Press): pp. 1–28; optional supplement: “Preface” (by Sartre) in The Wretched of the Earth.
14. 1. 2027	The Colonial Group in the Clinic: Reading Fanon’s Cases	A lecture and discussion on “Colonial War and Mental Disorders,” Fanon’s four series of clinical cases from the Algerian war. We read them not as isolated pathologies but, with the progressive-regressive method, for the single formation their composition into series exhibits, a group legible across the cases and in none of them alone. Here the arc of the course completes: where we began with the singular expelled by the universal in the philosophy of our age, we end with the series of singular cases that compose a universal structure. Our aim is to read Fanon’s cases for the group they compose.	“Colonial War and Mental Disorders” in The Wretched of the Earth: pp. 181–233