

Sartre, Jean-Paul (1905–80)

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Sartre's political thought could be characterized by three elements: (1) his life as a political project and performance, (2) freedom as a challenge of the relationship of ethics to political life, and (3) the historical weight of history and an imposing social world on the task of creating institutions that do not inhibit the development of human potential and relationships. In all, these boil down to the question of political life as an effort to bring the human being to the fore in the human world.

Life as Political Project and Performance

Jean-Paul-Charles-Aymard Sartre was born in Paris on June 21, 1905. His father Jean-Baptiste Sartre, a sailor who did a tour in Southeast Asia, died within a year of his son's birth. This event, Jean-Paul later declared in his autobiography *Les mots* (properly translated, "Words," (1964)), liberated him from an Oedipal complex. The result was baby Sartre and his mother Anne-Marie Schweitzer's returning to the home of his maternal grandparents, Charles ("Karl," to his German friends) and Louise Schweitzer, in Meudon, where they remained till she remarried and moved to Paris. Sartre fell in love with literature during his ten years in his grandparents' home, where he benefited from his grandfather Charles's tutelage and library. Charles was a lycée professor of German. During those years, Sartre also developed a neurotic belief in his genius as fraudulent. Dubbed a prodigy by his grandfather, whom in later years he resentfully called "God," he at first pretended to read and then write novels. Although his efforts led to his eventually actually reading and composing his own stories, the deception was detected by Charles, whom he deified and hence also feared, an experience that distressed him

for the remainder of his life. To some extent, his thesis of man as a useless passion to be God and his rejection of the possibility of the latter are both philosophical and psychoanalytical.

In 1915, Anne-Marie married Joseph Mancy, an engineer ten years her senior, whose various assignments took the family to La Rochelle where Sartre's interactions with working-class boys and the challenges of forging a place for himself as a small and unattractive youth, blind in one eye and hence mythically marked as a Cyclops, encouraged him to hone his most valuable weapon – his wits. The family eventually moved to Paris, where Sartre earned a place in the Lycée Henry IV and then the Lycée Louis-le-Grand. He met his brilliant and heroic friend Paul-Yves Nizan, who was later martyred (1940) in the fight against fascism in the Spanish Civil War. The two were inseparable. Sartre developed in those years an appreciation for the philosophy of Henri Bergson and distaste for the followers of Nietzsche, the latter of whom received, among other indignities, Nizan's and Sartre's wrath by way of being bombarded with urine-filled condoms as they yelled, "Thus pissed Zarathustra!" The two were oddly enough like Apollo (beauty, focus, and order, Nizan) and Dionysus (wine, women, dance, drama, Sartre), twins of genius in the discussion of Greek tragedy offered by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1961 [1872]). Both went on to study philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure, where, after coming last and therefore failing his exam in 1928, Sartre achieved first place and his doctorate in 1929. His revised dissertation was subsequently published in two volumes, *L'Imagination* (1962 [1936]) and *L'Imaginaire* (1948 [1940]), available in English as *Imagination* and *Psychology of Imagination*.

Sartre also met Simone de Beauvoir, who was a student at the Sorbonne (and the student who came in second in the examinations of

1929), during those years, and the two quickly became lifelong partners in an open and avowedly “necessary” relationship marked by much intellectual collaboration and an unyielding hatred of bourgeois values and society. Sartre taught at the lycée in Le Havre for the next several years, during which he spent the 1933/4 academic year at the Institut Français in Berlin. The fruit of that leave was *La transcendance de l'ego* ((1957 [1936]) [*Transcendence of the Ego*]). Although publishing outstanding work as a philosopher, Sartre’s aspirations were in literature. His chance came through the aid of one of his students, who showed Sartre’s manuscript “Melancholia” to his uncle Gaston Gallimard, who enthusiastically accepted it for publication with Gallimard’s recommended new title, *La Nausée* (1949 [1938]), inaugurating Sartre’s career as a literary figure. Sartre was conscripted in 1939, became a prisoner of war in 1940, and after his release in 1941, he founded the intellectual resistance group, *Socialisme et liberté*, which he disbanded within a year because of the arrest of two participants. Sartre then devoted his energy to writing for *Combat*, edited and published by Albert Camus, and produced his canonical treatise, *L'être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (1956 [1943]) [*Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*], which was followed by the play *Huis clos* (1947 [1945]) [*No Exit*]. At the end of the war in 1945, Sartre emerged as the most celebrated intellectual in the French-speaking world.

Sartre regarded his fame as a political responsibility. He founded *Les Temps modernes*, premised on his notion of *littérature engagée* (“engaged literature”), in 1945, with an editorial board that included Raymond Aron, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Posed against the notion of art for art’s sake, *littérature engagée* is premised on the notion of the writer’s responsibility to society. It is an indication of Sartre’s rejection of unsituated, idealistic thought free of social responsibility. It is a position that, as we will see, informs his political theory. He also visited the United States as a journalist that year and wrote on American antiblack racism

for *Le Figaro*. Influenced by Richard Wright’s insistence that the so-called “Negro problem” was really the problem of white antiblack racism, he wrote *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1948 [1946]) [“Reflections on the Jewish Question,” available in English as *Anti-Semite and Jew*], in which he argued that there was not a Jewish problem but a problem of anti-Semitism. He in effect devoted the rest of his life to political causes such as decolonization, workers’ struggles, antinuclear proliferation, antiwar struggles, especially the Vietnam War, and the student movements of the late 1960s. His support of the Algerian struggle for independence (1954–61) led to assassination attempts on his life. Although Sartre publicly endorsed Marxism until 1977, he never joined the Communist Party on the grounds of his conviction that the writer should belong to no institution. This stance led to his receiving criticisms from conservative and liberal critics, including his friends Raymond Aron and Merleau-Ponty, both of whom represent those respective political leanings. Sartre also argued that accolades could compromise the writer’s integrity and this position compelled him to reject many such as the French Legion of Honor, an invitation to become a faculty member of the prestigious Collège de France, and, most famously, the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964 (although he did accept an honorary doctorate from Jerusalem University in 1976). The major work from this period, the principal exemplar of his supposedly mature political thought, was *Critique de la raison dialectic I: Théorie des ensembles pratiques, précédé de Questions de méthode* (1982/1985 [1960]) [*Critique of Dialectical Reason I: The Theory of Practical Ensembles, prefaced by Questions of Method*], published in 1960, with the second volume published posthumously in 1985. He devoted the rest of his life to supporting the political causes to which he was committed, including developing resources for young writers, and composing the multivolume philosophical biography, *L'idiot de la famille: Gustave Flaubert de 1821 à 1857* (1981–93 [1971–2]) [*The Family Idiot*]. Sartre’s extraordinarily taxing lifestyle of political meetings and

literary production, matched by drugs and celebrity, eventually took its toll. He died of edema of the lungs, after a long period of suffering, on April 15, 1980.

Sartre's biography is a tale of a passionate struggle for freedom, or at least to live freely, as a negotiation of seemingly irreconcilable alternatives – reaching for the stars or transcendence (being-for-itself) while being weighted down at the ankles by gravity or facticity (being-in-itself). As literature was for him the handmaiden of the imagination, engaged conflict – at times, as in his youth, violent ones – marked the overcoming of self-concealed choices through the objective force of deed. These aspirations and realizations marked a variety of themes in his thought that often remain beneath what often seems like abrupt departures, divergences, or even abandonment. They include bad faith (*mauvaise foi*), wherein the agent hides from her or his responsibility for freedom, threat and dependency in a world of “others,” and in more familiar philosophical and political theoretical language, the effort to fuse existentialism and Marxism. He lived first as a libertine, doing almost without care what he willed, and then paradoxically committed to a political philosophy of responsibility that recognizes the option of living one's choices as a luxury.

Freedom as a Challenge of the Relationship of Ethics to Political Life

Sartre's so-called “early thought” is dominated by the question of the extent to which a human being is free and is capable of living that freedom. His argument is rooted in the phenomenological thought of Edmund Husserl, with whom he announces affinity in his important essay, “Une idée fondamentale de la phénoménologie de Husserl: l'intentionnalité” (1970 [1939]) [“A Fundamental Idea from Husserl's Phenomenology: Intentionality,” published in English simply as “Intentionality”] and against whom he articulated his difference, through some important misreadings in *Transcendence of the Ego*. In the former, he outlined the

importance of making distinctions for the emergence of knowledge. As intentionality involves the directedness of consciousness, where the latter is always *of* something, no knowledge could be established without this relationship. Without making distinctions, there being no negation (what he calls “nihilation”), consciousness would have no departure. It would not “be,” but this is paradoxical since as a relationship, it could not be in itself but always in relation to something else.

This relational theory informs much of Sartre's subsequent thought. In his work on imagination, Sartre argues that phenomenism – the doctrine that there are only phenomena – does not work because of the distinction between imaging and perceiving. The difference between the imagined Parthenon and the real one, for example, is that one could count the columns in the latter but not so in the former. For the phenomenist to make her- or himself believe there is no distinction between image and perception requires the ignoring of evidence for the facilitation of believing what she or he ultimately does not believe. That argument returns in his critique of Husserl's notion of a transcendental ego, which Sartre rejects on several grounds, including, as he interprets it, the consequence of placing an ego behind consciousness. That ego must in effect make consciousness its object, which would lead to a structure of a nonconscious foundation of consciousness. This form, however, would lead to an opaque condition of translucence, which Sartre regards as contradictory. Sartre's error, however, is to interpret Husserl's argument as placing a *thing* behind consciousness instead of articulating a *formal feature of consciousness*. One could interpret Husserl as arguing that the most radical presentation of anything as an object of consciousness must take the form of intentionality, which he regards as the transcendental ego. As Alfred Schutz argued in the first volume of his collected papers, *The Problem of Social Reality* (1962), for instance, Sartre's mistake emerges from interpreting the transcendental ego as a psychological one. For our purposes,

the argument's form is one in which an active principle has a passive one behind it as its foundation. Since one must evaluate the other, Sartre's argument is a metatheoretical one familiar to philosophers studying self-reference. In effect, he is arguing that the self-evaluative capacity of consciousness makes it fundamentally *incomplete*, similar to the way Kurt Gödel showed in his two incompleteness theorems (1986 [1931]: volume 1) that any logical system sophisticated enough to be self-referential must generate paradoxes and thus be formally incomplete. This was a devastating observation for Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell's foundational system of mathematical logic in *Principia Mathematica* (1910–13). Sartre, although not comparing himself to Gödel by virtue of there being no evidence of his knowing anything about him in the 1930s, pretty much located his relation to Husserl in similar fashion. Although Husserl's logic could easily be defended through a discussion of its radicality, what is crucial here is that Sartre's rejection of transcendental phenomenology was generative for his thought.

The first insight for Sartre was that without anything "behind" consciousness, the distinction or negation establishing the relationship to objects must be free. This observation raises the philosophical problem of contingency: if the material world is governed by necessity, but it was not necessary for the universe to have come into being, its emergence must be contingent, but how, then, could contingency be possible? There is a paradox here, since the question asks for the necessary conditions of contingency through having observed the contingent emergence of necessity. In prosaic language, this metaphysical conundrum and observation about its experience suggest that even the choice against freedom must be chosen and hence be a manifestation of freedom. This trope of identifying performative contradictions leads to the observation, developed in *Being and Nothingness*, that genuine freedom involves the ability to attempt to evade that freedom. If freedom were not able to make this effort, choice would be impossible. Freedom, in other words, is also the ability to reject freedom.

Sartre drew many consequences from this observation. They include the desire to be complete, an accomplishment that would mean being God. But since such a being would have to be a full consciousness, it collapses into a *reductio ad absurdum*, since consciousness requires negation, which, by definition, militates against completeness and fullness.

Sartre, moreover, adds to the argument a consideration later taken up by Merleau-Ponty. Consciousness must have a location in order for differentiation and emergence to occur; every "there," in other words, requires a "here" and vice versa. To belong "everywhere," as one imagines with an omnipresent deity, means to belong "nowhere." Sartre's conclusion: consciousness must be *embodied* or what he calls *consciousness in the flesh*. This last observation enables Sartre to describe varieties of bad faith, including those of disembodiment or hyperembodiment. A disembodied consciousness is a model of "radical freedom" or what Sartre calls the "anarchic consciousness." It emerges through forcing others to assume the role of the body against and of which such a consciousness imagines it is independent. Sartre also calls this bourgeois consciousness. The hyperembodied conception eliminates the distinguishing or negating capacities of consciousness in the flesh, reducing it to a thing. He identifies this condition as one imposed on oppressed populations, such as the proletariat and lumpenproletariat, racialized, ethnic, and religious minorities, women, and homosexuals.

Sartre's concern with conflict comes to the fore here through a peculiar form of bad faith that emerges through the meeting of embodied consciousnesses: if the relationship must be one of subject to object, then it would seem that only a conflict against objectification will emerge, which echoes the struggle between master and slave in the formation of self-consciousness in the thought of G. W. F. Hegel. An often overlooked aspect of Sartre's argument, however, is that the notion of a pure subject and a pure object are forms of bad faith, correlatives of which he demonstrated to be sadism and hate on one hand and masochism and contradictory love on the

other. Both involve someone being forced outside of what is properly a human relationship and into becoming a “thing.” Sadism and masochism raise questions, however, of the distinction between sexual play and serious assertions of such identities. Values of sadism and masochism, in addition to those of mastery and bondage, are examples of the spirit of seriousness. It is a concept drawn from the thought of Nietzsche. The opposite of that form of bad faith, where values are treated as material, is play. To take our values *too seriously* leads to forgetting our responsibility for our values, what Nietzsche described as valuing our values or transvaluation in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1968 [1886]) and *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1956 [1887]).

There is a logical conclusion from Sartre’s discussion of sadistic and masochistic forms of bad faith. As forms of bad faith, they must be false beliefs. If this is so, that means their opposite must be true. Thus, sadism, as an appeal to disembodied consciousness, is a flight from the truth of embodied consciousness. Masochism, as a denial of being embodied consciousness, must be an evasion of being consciousness or freedom in the flesh. Since both involve a lie about a relationship with another human being, the asocial conclusions they occasion must also be false. Social relationships must, therefore, be possible.

Sartre’s conclusion from all this is that evading freedom entails the same for one’s humanity. The impact this effort has on ethics, justice, and a variety of other values is that they could be avowed through the assertion of their opposite. Ethics could be corrupted by seriousness, but it could also be so through paradoxically serious play of no responsibility. Justice, too, which John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (1971) calls the primary virtue of social institutions, could be corrupted through rule-fetishism, which is a form of seriousness. Failing to see the human foundations of social institutions could lead to the paradox of unjust justice. At the end of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre announced his aim to formulate an ethics. His subsequent career, however, is one of realizing that the modern world demands political solutions for meaningful ethical life.

Sartre’s “Middle Passage”

Sartre regarded his role as the most celebrated postwar intellectual in France (and perhaps Europe) as a privilege not to be taken lightly. He brought flesh to his thought through examinations of anti-Semitism, antiblack racism, bourgeois politics, Marxism, and more. The underlying argument of political work as a struggle against dehumanization brought him in dialogue with ideas from what today is known as the Global South to the point of Abiola Irele, the famed Nigerian literary theorist and political critic, referring to him as an Africana (African Diasporic) philosopher in *The Negritude Moment* (2011). This is because Sartre took Richard Wright’s insight into the problem of making people into problems, which was theoretically fleshed out earlier in the thought of W. E. B. Du Bois, and elaborated in Sartre’s *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1948 [1946]), *Orphée noir* (1948) [“Black Orpheus”], *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr* (1963 [1952]) [*Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*], and many essays and novels examining themes of how dominated groups live their humanity under dehumanizing conditions. As the anti-Semite creates the image of the Jew as lowly, bourgeois society left few options for Jean Genet, a lumpenproletariat homosexual, not to become a thief and a male prostitute. That Genet produced great literature challenged the legitimacy of the society’s values of exclusion, but even if he had not, the extent to which he lived his life free of or at least against those values made him, at the end of the day, more human than those who degraded him. This observation emerges from Sartre’s understanding of degradation as an effort to eliminate human-to-human relationships. It is his “Black Orpheus,” however, that offers a portent of the direction in which his thought was headed. Written as the foreword to Léopold Senghor’s *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (1948) [*Anthology of New Negro and Malagasy Poetry in the French Language*], Sartre advanced what Irele identifies as a major contribution to the study of Negritude, the surrealist movement coined by Aimé Césaire but which also stands as the offspring of a variety

of Caribbean and African intellectuals such as Léon-Gontran Damas and Senghor. The Sartrean version regards Negritude as a form of antiracist racism, where the assertion of black superiority galvanizes and revolutionizes blacks into rejecting white supremacy and prepares them for the universal struggle of overcoming class exploitation. His argument led to his endorsing many stereotypes about black thinking and proclivities, but it also had the virtue of leading to his meditating on the methodological presuppositions of this thought – that is, the legitimacy of the dialectical movements he presumed.

Since the causes he supported included workers' rights, his concerns with dialectical thinking inevitably led to the question of the kind of dialectic he was employing. This worry was exacerbated by the Cold War and the expansionist activities of the Soviet Union. Although as he argued in the series of articles that became *The Communists and Peace* (1968 [1952]), Sartre believed that the United States was more likely to wage a first nuclear strike on the USSR, the realities of Stalinism began to strain his faith, for if the most powerful avowed Communist country really was Marxism in practice, how was he to assess its failures – especially when his arguments against the United States were also premised on its being the leading exemplar of capitalism and imperialism in the postwar years? Moreover, throughout his efforts to ally himself with working-class struggles, Sartre faced continuous criticism for his position of not joining any institution. The French Communist Party thus treated him with suspicion, especially because of his decision to publish *Being and Nothingness* in 1943 and thus breaking the writers' boycott, for which he received criticisms not only from that front but also from German Jewish critical theorists such as Theodor Adorno, who, in his *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1974 [1964]), regarded existentialism as vacuous, libertarian, and bourgeois. In effect, Sartre needed to respond to proponents of "orthodox Marxism" and those who regarded existentialism as a form of radical libertarianism. His opportunity to develop a response emerged in 1957 in the form of a commissioned

essay for the Polish journal *Twórczość* [*Creativity* or *Creative Output*]. The contribution, originally entitled "Marxisme et l'existentialisme" ["Marxism and Existentialism"], was used as the preface to his next major work, for which, as he subsequently argued, it should have been placed as an afterword. Known in French as *Questions de méthode* and in English as *Search for a Method* (1967), the work brought the problematics of existentialism and Marxism together with all the tensions such a conjunction occasions.

The work itself is burdened by moments of grandiose rhetoric under which its main contribution could be overlooked. Marxism, for instance, is claimed to be *the* philosophy of the times, which in this case was the age of imperialism, revolution, and possible global apocalypse marked by the threat of the Cold War. Yet Sartre situates his thought in the essay as Søren Kierkegaard (the existentialist) did vis-à-vis Hegel, albeit with the difference of endorsement instead of explicit antagonism. His point, however, was that just as Kierkegaard criticized Hegel's system *dialectically*, so, too, must existentialists address the challenges of Marxism. *The question*, so to speak, was whether orthodox Marxism was failing to be dialectical. Sartre's answer was affirmative by virtue of the dominance of what could be called a *closed dialectic* (the contradiction of an anti-systematic materialism collapsing into a "system"), which, as with his observations about bad faith, amounts to the spirit of seriousness. Dialectical thought must, in other words, be open. For critics who may have regarded his declarations against his existential philosophy of freedom as abandoning it, his remark to his godson John ("Tito") Gerassi in December 1970, recently published in *Talking with Sartre* (2009), says otherwise: "Be serious. I am simply saying that man is free. To deny it is bad faith."

The structure of a critique of dialectical reason is one of metacritique or a critical reflection on critique and reason. At this point, Sartre's intellectual conflicts expanded to include the discourse on structure that was emerging from his debates with Claude Lévi-Strauss. While

Sartre shared the structuralist rejection of consciousness as a substance or thing, he rejected the antihumanist dimensions of the argument whereby the human being is simply an effect of structural relations. This is not to say that he considered the individual to be a free-floating, self-sufficient signifier or, worse, substance. Ironically, his concern placed him in Husserl's position of defending a specific relationship by which even structure must be made intelligible. The question of method, then, became the philosophical anthropological question of the human being and the suitability of a system of thought for a human world of human relations and institutions. Sartre's reminder here is that political thought belongs properly among the human sciences, and the danger is that in forgetting this, the bad faith desire for a social science without human beings emerges.

Existential Marxism?

The general view of Sartre's critics was to treat existential Marxism as a contradiction in terms. Such a reading, however, is problematic if Marx's thought is understood as diagnosing the consequences of human alienation. As a theory about overcoming the mystification of the human dimension of human relationships and institutions, Marxist philosophical anthropology could be read in existential terms as a form of humanistic explanation of the material conditions necessary for the production of a human world. Sartre understood, however, that the philosophical anthropological portrait must offer a conception of the social world that examines what could be called, paraphrasing W. E. B. Du Bois, the limits of chance not only on human conduct but also the formation of human groups. Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* takes on these difficult tasks.

A central objective of the *Critique* is to tell the story of the human being from a broader framework than the dyadic self-Other units of *Being and Nothingness*. This is because, as we saw, the error of the reductive poles necessitates at least the possibility of their transcendence in the

form of a social world. Whereas the method of the earlier work is a meeting of existentialism and phenomenology (which raises similar questions to that of existentialism and Marxism), the latter's demand for a convergence with historical materialism requires a historically situated but not reduced phenomenology, which could be called dialectical phenomenology, although it is not the term Sartre used.

Additional irony and a source of tension here also is the title of the work, which echoes in form Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1990 [1781/1787]). As Husserl had made his transcendental turn through lectures on Kant, which led to his interrogating phenomenology through the development of transcendental phenomenology, the suggestion here is that Sartre would be exploring the conditions of possibility for dialectical reason. The noted difference, however, is that dialectical reasoning was not Sartre's initial philosophical concern; that would have required "a critique of existential reason," although the underlying interrogation into contingency continued. Sartre, however, was conducting a critique of Marxism, which depends methodologically on dialectical reasoning, specifically dialectical materialism. He, in effect, faced, at least procedurally, conducting an investigation similar to Husserl's: he could not presume the legitimacy of phenomenology, existentialism, analytical reasoning, positivist reason, or even varieties of dialectical reason, and he could only arrive at a dialectical outcome if and only if dialectical reason really *is* the approach – or better, *the logic* – best suited for understanding the human world in all its complexity, which means intelligible aggregates and history. His word for this process would not be welcomed in the post-modern age to come: *totalization*.

It should be borne in mind that Sartre's notion of totalizing is not identical with the essentialist claims criticized by many post-modern theorists. In phenomenology, there is a methodological movement of articulating the intelligibility of a phenomenon without laying claim to absoluteness. Certain commitments are put to the side, "bracketed," or suspended.

Sometimes called “the natural attitude,” and other times “ontological commitments,” the point of this procedure is to identify recurring elements of what could be communicated or understood. Brought into the dialectical context, the dynamic aspect of dialectics, where *movements* of unfolding intelligibility over an incomplete set of relations is the task at hand, suggests, in effect, a totalizing activity that is never *total*. This is the paradoxical side of Sartre’s early thought reaching into his later one. In his earlier formulation, the project of a complete narrative (an essence) succeeds emergence in the world (existence). In the *Critique*, the upsurge is practice, what could also be called action, and when premised on the realization of freedom it is called *praxis*.

The human relations or series of relations generated by praxis are “fields,” wherein there is a tension between fixing the action (for its intelligibility) and producing it. What is it, however, that inaugurates praxis? If the agents were gods, there will be complete cohesion between movement and fulfillment. In the human world, however, there is a gap; there are wants and needs. The constellation of meanings produced by the human world also adds something to reality, which, paradoxically, also takes something away from it – reminiscent of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s formulation in *Du contrat social* (2008 [1761]) [*The Social Contract*] of being in chains albeit born with liberty – and that is scarcity. The struggle conditioned by scarcity necessitates praxis, but efforts at freedom could become routinized, “inert,” and fall into what Sartre calls “practico-inertia,” dead practice. An exemplar of this phenomenon is *seriality*, where repetition hides agency from those on which certain practices and institutions depend, the effect of which is rendering them socially impotent.

As in *Being and Nothingness*, where the anarchic consciousness or bourgeois attitudes create the illusion of an individual who is master through objectifying all others, Sartre here offers a critique of the individual under the myth of the free market. By appealing to a conception of the self and freedom as being

outside of relations with all others, the model of the individual is left without an extension of her or his actions across a social world. Such an individual is, in Sartre’s words, “impotent.” Desocialization, pushing the human being out of social relations with others, isolates her or him in a downward spiral into brute physical models of power, a material condition without spirit or ideas. Sartre reminds the radical materialist that even *materialism* is an idea, which makes the effort to eliminate all idealism in such terms self-contradictory:

In fact, there is a materialist idealism which, in the last analysis, is merely a discourse on the idea of matter; the real opposite of this is realist materialism – the thought of an individual who is *situated* in the world, penetrated by every cosmic force, and treating the material universe as something which gradually reveals itself through a “situated” *praxis*. (Sartre 1982/1985 [1960]: vol. 1, 29)

But he goes further, in his discussion of fields of action, to show that a human world relies on transcending such reductions through understanding the relationships by which individuals could emerge as such, and those involve the formation of groups. A dynamic example of such a process is what he calls “groups in fusion.”

Sartre’s political theory thus depends throughout on making apparent human dimensions of human affairs. In the second volume of the *Critique*, this consideration is brought to the fore in his spectacular discussion of boxing, a sport he practiced in his youth. He distinguished “the fight” as experienced by the boxers from that of the trainers, assistants, and the audience. The fighters are *in* the fight and are simply trying to knock each other down. During the breaks, the trainers contribute their observation of what the opponents are trying to do, their stratagem. And throughout, the audience is involved in cheering on their chosen fighter or simply encouraging the rhythm of the battle, and the referees asserting their authority and the tenor of the event. Sartre then points out that if the spectators were asked to

describe the fight, there would be a variety of stories not simply because there were many watching the fight but also because each was actually *in the fight*. The fight, in other words, is the entire social drama of investments. Responsibility for the bout thus goes beyond the two boxers and on to the many people who constitute the set of relations for the event – the referees, the trainers, the master of ceremonies, the audience. Brought to a conflict such as the Cold War, Sartre's point becomes one of collective responsibility for global political affairs. In answer to contemporary concerns of global economic crises, rising enslavement of vulnerable populations, the “war on terror,” civil wars, famine, and environmental degradation, everyone is responsible.

Influence

John Gerassi summarized the difficulty of Sartre's position well when he wrote:

Sartre's philosophy is difficult to live. Perhaps because of that, most Anglo-Saxon commentators and teachers, raised on an escape-crammed philosophical tradition of pragmatism, preferred to praise the moral message propagated by Sartre's existential rival, Albert Camus. Since all organized actions lead to doctrinaire authoritarianism, said Camus, all we can do is shout, No!

Bad faith, replied Sartre. What we must do instead, he said, is commit ourselves over and over again. No act is pure. All acts are choices, which alienate some. No one can live without dirty hands. To be simply opposed is also to be responsible for not being in favor, for not advocating change. (Gerassi 2009: 275)

There are those who found Sartre's thought inspiring and others – such as Martin Heidegger and the genealogical line of thinkers sharing his attack on theometafysics and his proto-deconstructive recommendation in *Being and Time* (1962 [1927]) – who found it annoying. In terms of the former, Sartre's political thought had an enormous impact on political thinkers in what used to be called the Third World but now the Global South. The most spectacular of these, who, too, lived a life too arduous for most

to imitate, was Frantz Fanon, whose canonical meditation on racism and colonialism, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1967 [1952]) [*Black Skin, White Masks*], offers some of the most nuanced criticisms of Sartre's thought. Sartre wrote the preface to *Les damnés de la terre* (1963 [1961]) [“The Damned of the Earth,” but published in English as *The Wretched of the Earth*], where his own conception of violence is often confused with Fanon's. Sartre saw all of social life, institutions of legality and politics, as governed by violence and the constant struggle to transcend it. Fanon's position is different, focusing instead on the specificity of colonialism as an order fundamentally premised on violence and injustice.

Through Fanon, Sartre's thought had an impact on political theories of liberation. These include the Brazilian philosopher of education and political theorist Paulo Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), which is in part a homage to *Les damnés de la terre*, has the same form as Sartre's argument about the emancipating significance of reminding the human being of her or his responsibility for acts of learning. Sartre's influence could also be found in a variety of Africana, race, and feminist political theory. Many of these theorists, such as Linda Bell, Debra Bergoffen, Robert Bernasconi, the late Steve Bantu Biko, Robert Birt, Drucilla Cornell, David Theo Goldberg, Jane Anna Gordon, Lewis Gordon, Abdul JanMohamed, William Jones, Sonia Krucks, Charles Mills, Michael Monahan, Mabogo More, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Lucius T. Outlaw, Gail Weiss, the late Iris Marion Young, and Naomi Zack, identify colonialism, racism, and sexism as social investments in false conceptions of human relations and a problematic philosophical anthropology; Sartre's discussion of bad faith and his rejection of dehumanizing institutions and social practices have had direct influence on their work. This line of political theory is also inspired directly or indirectly through the thought of Sartre's lifetime partner, Simone de Beauvoir.

Heidegger's “Letter on Humanism” (1977 [1947]) indicted Sartre's existentialism for its notion of “human reality,” which the former saw as entrapped in metaphysical assumptions

privileging notions such as gods and man and thus insufficiently radical at clearing the way for a proper meditation on problems of Being. The influence Heidegger had on poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, and generations of French intellectuals wishing to go beyond the celebrated father figure, led to the subordination of Sartre's political theory in their thought and their followers'. Derrida's deconstruction and Foucault's archaeology and genealogical approaches pointed more, as well, to Nietzsche's critique of modern thought, another conservative thinker whose work Sartre used with circumspection. Through the combination of Nietzsche and Heidegger, poststructuralist political theorists tended to reject the humanism and liberation concerns of Sartrean political theory and the conscious subjects on which they were based, preferring instead to examine the semiological and linguistic bases of those concepts and demonstrating the difficulty of asserting supervening claims of ethics over politics. Other poststructuralists, such as Judith Butler, Paul Gilroy, and Achille Mbembe, appreciate Sartre's concept of projection in models of the performance of political relationships and their role in the construction of gendered, racialized, and sexual subjects, but they, too, part company with his philosophy of consciousness.

Some critics have attempted to reconcile Sartre's political thought with poststructuralism, particularly Jacques Derrida's and Michel Foucault's. Robert D. Cummings (1972), Thomas Flynn (2006), and Christina Howell (1992) offer excellent studies. Peter Caws has shown, however, that many of the structuralist and post-structuralist arguments against Sartre's political thought, by way of a critique of his philosophical anthropology, could be found in the conflict between Lévi-Strauss and Sartre. As he concluded in his essay, "Sartrean Structuralism?":

"The system uses": This is what I have called the fallacy of misplaced agency, which violates the Marxist principle ...: There are only men and real relations between men ... The human sciences, I continue to think, are best served at the present time by recognizing and cultivating the theoretical power of Structuralism. Too quickly abandoned by its own exponents

in their rush to the new and 'post-', it is capable, as Marxism was not, of playing the role Sartre ascribed to Marxism in *Questions de méthode* as the philosophy for our time. A thought out of season, perhaps, but one with which long immersion in the work of Sartre persuades me that he might, the hardening of controversy apart, have agreed. (Caws 1992: 302).

Caws's observation could be applied as well to Pierre Bourdieu, who rejects Sartre's political thought in *The Logic of Practice* (1990 [1980]) as an "imaginary novel of the death and resurrection of freedom." A close reading of Bourdieu's work on class, social fields, symbolic violence, and many more reveal more affinities with Sartrean social and political theory, the rejection of consciousness to the side, than Bourdieu and his followers may admit.

Finally, although not exhaustively, there is the relevance of Sartre's political thought to so-called "mainstream" work such as those devoted to theories of social, distributive, and retributive justice, jurisprudence, and republicanism in Anglo-analytical political theory. William L. McBride has done a splendid job of outlining many of these considerations in *Sartre's Political Theory* (1991). Sartre's main critique of these models of political theory is metatheoretical and normative. The first pertains to the philosophical anthropology on which they are based, most of which are rooted in bourgeois models of individuality. This model, McBride contends, conceals actual power relations on which such conceptions of human beings depend. His normative critique is that the underlying relations are violent ones, especially those linked to the preservation of the market and the invisibility of vulnerable populations. One could speculate on what, given those criticisms, a Sartrean theory of justice would be. Given his attacks on bourgeois thought, one would think such a question would be remiss, but an admission to Gerassi from November 1970 suggests otherwise and serves as a suitable point at which to close, which, for Sartre, is always an opening:

Do you know that in 1955 when I was in China, Chou En-lai said that the notion of equality is a petit bourgeois notion. That

really shocked me. I guess party communists must believe that, so as to justify their central committees running everyone's lives. It's very hard for people to understand that equality does not mean that we are all as intelligent; it means that our joy, our pain, our need to be relevant, are equal. (2009: 11–12)

SEE ALSO: Beauvoir, Simone de (1908–86); Body, The; Bourdieu, Pierre (1930–2002); Contingency; Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt (1868–1963); Existentialism, Philosophy of; Fanon, Frantz (1925–61); Freedom; Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm (1844–1900); Structuralism; Violence

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