

The question of authority in revolution and social order

The Terror of Jean-Paul Sartre

Samuel Hux

The tremendous interest that Existentialism once generated has not quite simply abated. Historians of ideas will of course continue to write about it, and philosophers will continue to borrow and modify some of its concepts; but still it does not have the immediate and even urgent impact it once had, both deserved and exaggerated. Seldom any longer will one hear a friend say, "I am grateful to Sartre. He gave me a language to describe fears and feelings I really had when I...."

Existentialism has receded to a distance where it can be viewed with more calm and detachment; but such was its nature, its considerations—"alienation," "engagement," "authenticity," *existence* (!)—that this recession means in a sense that it has lost part of its meaning. It is now perceived as a kind of intellectual institution, energized by only flickers of urgency, a *body* of ideas instead of an *activity*, a vital intellectual engagement with the world, a philosophizing.

Three recently published books by or about Sartre do little to counter this impression: the two-volume *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre* and a collection of Sartre's essays of the 1960's, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*. The second and smaller of *The Writings, Selected Prose*, is a collection of seldom-published short pieces from 1923 to 1964, many of them appearing here for the first time in English; the first and larger volume is *A Bibliographical Life*, a year-by-year annotated bibliography, occasional excerpts included, of everything Sartre has written, from novels and philosophical tomes to prefaces and letters-to-the-editor. Because of its breadth, because it has brief summaries of occasional journalism not normally available to readers outside France, it is a monumental work for scholars—and it is also a monument, one can hardly escape the impression, of the kind normally

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reserved for writers safely deceased.

Between Existentialism and Marxism reminds one that the commemoration is not really premature. An essay on "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal," for instance, an argument that the Dane's thought can survive only when incorporated into the philosophy of historical dialectic, first Hegelian and now Marxist, reminds us that with some fanfare Sartre announced the end of his own Existentialism fifteen years ago in *Critique of Dialectical Reasoning*. Nothing in the recent writings can be taken as a change of mind. It's clear: he meant it.

Existentialism, Sartre wrote back then, is not a philosophy but an ideology. That is, it is the work of *idéologues* who, coming after the "great flowering" of a philosophical system, "cultivate the domain,...take an inventory,...erect certain structures there,...may even bring about certain internal changes; but they still get their nourishment from the living thought of the great dead"—in this case, Marx. Existentialism "is a parasitical system living on the margin of Knowledge [i.e., Marxism], which at first it opposed but into which today it seeks to be integrated." Sartre is willing to pay his way in, for he's convinced that Marxism needs the existential ideology to provide itself with the clear sense of human subjectivity it lacks—for all its objectivity about broad historical forces—and make possible a convincing philosophical mediation between the *praxis* of the individual actor, the particularity of the historical event, and the sociohistorical dialectic.

The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, edited by Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka (translated by Richard C. McCleary. Northwestern University Press; Vol. I, 654 pp.; Vol. II, 252 pp.; \$35.00)
Between Existentialism and Marxism, by Jean-Paul Sartre (Pantheon; 302 pp.; \$10.00)

I do not wish to push my metaphors to the point of obituary. But before Sartre's existentialism vanishes thoroughly *from* our immediate concern or *into* some Marxist integration that leaves us convinced that *The Transcendence of the Ego, Nausea, The Psychology of the Imagination, The Flies, Being and Nothingness, Existentialism Is a Humanism*, and so on, were but cultivations, inventories, momentary structures in hesitant preparation for the *Critique* and now parasitical of it, I would like to wonder aloud what it means—this slow disappearance, what it means about Sartre's philosophy all along.

The central image in Sartre's thought, and the most indelible impression he has left, is the mutual conflict between the Self and the Other, and the fragile resolution of that conflict. In *Being and Nothingness* a man's coming into existence, the rise of a human consciousness, was described as a kind of

ontological severance, the "nothingness" of the title, a "hole in the heart of being." As a consciousness, *l'être-pour-soi*, I am different from the rest of Being, which "is what it is," because I am a potentiality. I create my identity day-by-day, I am a transcendence, a I do not have the fixedness of a thing, *l'être-en-soi*. Since a consciousness exists only as consciousness of something, I am a series of "intentions" upon the world about me.

But part of that world is the Other—who first appears to me as a thing, *en-soi*; he is after all the *object* of my consciousness. Gradually I notice that he is looking at me, and I assume correctly that he in turn views me as *en-soi*. The *Look*. He objectifies me as I do him. Since we are both consciousness, "intentions" who need something to "intend" upon, we are mutually dependent; but since at the same time one experiences the Other as something that rejects objectification by returning it, we experience each other as threats. We steal each other's freedom as a nonobject; we each refuse to have our freedom stolen. We are necessary antagonists; our ontological relationship is one of mutual aggression. That is the most publicized image—or rather half-image—in *Being and Nothingness*. Much less acknowledged is Sartre's attempt to explain how a community of purpose can arise between such natural antagonists.

Imagine that I and the Other are experiencing the reciprocal "Look" when an accident occurs in the street and we each turn to view it. "Immediately," says Sartre, "at the very instant when I become a spectator of the incident, I experience myself non-thetically as engaged in 'we.' The earlier rivalries ... have (momentarily) disappeared.... 'We' look at the event, 'we' take part." Such an experience is fleeting, however. So imagine another situation. I versus the Other; suddenly a "Third" appears and looks at...Us. To the Third we are "Them"; we are being converted by the Third's look into objects, but, as well, into an incipient collective

which I agree in solidarity with the Other to constitute. And to the extent that on principle I assume my being-outside for the Third, I must similarly assume the Other's being-outside; what I assume is a community of equivalence by means of which I exist in a form which like the Other I agree to constitute.

Sartre's example of men in the street is only a beginning metaphor, for he has in mind a larger significance for the Third. It sounds like the *Critique*, but it's still *Being and Nothingness*:

The "master," the "feudal lord," the "bourgeois," the "capitalist,"

all appear not only as powerful people who command but in addition and above all as *Thirds*; that is, as those who are outside the oppressed community and for whom this community exists. It is there-

fore for them in their freedom that the reality of the oppressed class is going to exist. They cause it to be born by their look.

The image of I and the Other reappears in the *Critique*, our hostility, our awkward and suspicious movement toward a We—but all, as we'll see, on a fundamentally different ground. Indeed, this image of antagonism and its resolution is Sartre's major offering to Marxism in the hundreds of pages of the *Critique*; it is his attempt to give Marxism a believable and non-mechanistic anthropology. But it is also an attempt to show how it is possible to believe in collective action without sacrificing a belief in the antagonistic nature of man.

Sartre may be the most significant philosopher of all time to lavish so much attention on people standing about on street corners. But this time we're waiting for a bus. We already have a relationship of a kind: We are an unadhesive collection of isolated consciousness, *singly* possessing the same goal of gaining a seat; but this requires no more cooperation than our simply standing there in a file. We are a "series"; our relationship is "seriality." Insofar as we are in a series—and of course there are more momentous series than bus queues: classes, ethnic groupings, and so on, the situations we are born into—we exist, each for ourself, in the *practico-inerte*, Sartre's term for the lumpy, disparate, nonpurposive, casual thereness of society, the social residue, perhaps, of previous purposive orders lapsed into inertia.

While I remain in a series, my eyes set on a goal—a seat, for instance, or, better yet, an adequate wage for someone of my class in my society's economy—I am not greatly different from that *l'être-pour-soi* staring about suspiciously at the Others who are merely part of *l'être-en-soi*. But when I recognize, or am made to recognize by external pressures, that the goal I *singly* possess as do the Others in the series I also *share* with the others, I am on my way toward the mutual agreement to constitute a "group"—Sartre's word for a series become conscious of its collective power. We take over the bus, as it were, and distribute the seats equitably. Or: we become a revolutionary proletariat instead of a seriality of wage earners. Or: et cetera.

But this "group" was created with much more ease, with much less difficulty in overcoming rivalries within the series, than that "community of equivalence" I agreed with the Other to constitute back in *Being and Nothingness*. That is because Sartre has changed his mind about what made us antagonists in the first place. Our hostility is not *ontologically* grounded after all; it is not the result of my consciousness being born as a definitive severance between me and all the rest of Being; it is not a matter of the "Look." Rather, it is a matter of socioeconomics: We were antagonists prior to the group because of scar-

city, because of our conflicting *needs*. Sartre has made his analysis more amenable to the Marxist, but—it seems to me—at the cost of cutting the heart out of his philosophy.

It might be said, on the other hand, that such a cost has its compensation: a much more hopeful and humanistic view of things. But the story is hardly over; for a problem arises that Sartre tries to resolve in a way that will not satisfy those who applaud that hopeful compensation above.

I have already suggested that an element of the *practico-inerte* is the residue of numerous “groups” that have lapsed into “seriality.” And, indeed, the problem of the group is that its lasting power is suspect, dependent upon the specific shared project of the constituents. Suppose there is a gain that appears less temporary than it is: How can the group remain “fused”? It cannot forever, unless/until there is no more scarcity, in which case, I suppose, there would be no need.

In the meantime, to prevent a rhythm of series and group and group and series, the constituents make an “oath,” a kind of contract, and exercise upon the recalcitrant constituent the *terreur*. There has already been something like a Third: people and institutions that benefit from seriality and the nullifying conflict of my and the Other’s rivalrous needs. But now the Terror is a kind of Third, interiorized within the group. There is an improvement of a sort, for collectivity in this scheme is not merely a kind of near-impotent, parasitical responsiveness to whatever oppressed us from outside, a *dependence upon* being oppressed in order to be a group instead of a series; rather, we are held together from inside—or seemingly so.

Now, while the Terror sounds more terrible in ordinary language than it necessarily does in political thought, where it can suggest the administering of the discipline deemed necessary within a movement, a party, or a nation, we should not launder the term too much by ignoring ordinary connotations. We know what Committees of Public Safety are, and revolutionary cadres, and dictatorships of the proletariat. To be fair, Sartre does not play dumb to implications in his analysis. He suggests a certain inevitability to the Bolshevik Revolution’s remaining “fused” by a combination of “bureaucracy, terror, and personality cult.” But I don’t think we should be disarmed, either, by preventive-disarming admissions and mumble something about eggs and omelettes.

George Lichtheim was perfectly right that “Sartre’s attitude to the Russian Revolution and Stalin is more or less that of Hegel to the French Revolution and Napoleon.” And we should take thorough note of how little the individual is, compared to the group-in-fusion, to the “Fraternity of Terror,” as Sartre calls it with no hint of humor. Lionel Abel once pointed out that a strange reversal from *Being and Nothingness* takes place at this point in the *Critique*. The individual consciousness was, back then, *l’être-pour-soi*; as

against the inertness of *l’être-en-soi*; now the group is in effect the *pour-soi*, while the individual consciousness, threatening the dissolution of the “fraternity” into the *practico-inerte*, is the *en-soi*, the mere sodden thereness of Being.

A tentative judgment or two may be in order. Sartre’s contribution to political phenomenology is shown in the *Critique* to be exactly what Lichtheim called it, essentially Hobbesian. Which is no small thing! Except that Sartre’s analysis is not so profound as to be a significant improvement of Hobbes, nor so very haunting and revelatory. One is not inclined to say here as a critic has said of Hobbes, “We are not often led to the brink of the abyss and asked to look at ourselves, as in a darkened mirror.” Indeed, there is something unconvincing—perhaps a mere prejudice of mine, the effects of boyhood Calvinism not outgrown—and pedestrian in being told, as we were not in *Being and Nothingness*, that we are such animals simply because we are hungry, which is what it amounts to. But beyond this, I think one really has to question the size of Sartre’s fundamental contribution to political sociology. Is his analysis of how groups are formed from antagonistic material really, to be blunt, beyond the capacities of a moderately talented sociologist? Not that it *has* to be beyond that to be true—but suspicions of a certain hoopla are hard to avoid.

More important, there is no pretense in the *Critique* of value-free sociology, or certain conclusions arrived at with much “sad to say, but....” Occasional libertarian rhetoric to the contrary (and there’s a good deal of it, especially during and after the May “revolution” of 1968), Sartre becomes one of the apologists for Leviathan. That’s no particular surprise by this time, of course, but it is something I should like to approach, now, in a quite different and ultimately ironic way.

In the history of existentialism where does Max Stirner come in?” asked Herbert Read. Read answered, “Stirner is one of the most existentialist of all past philosophers, and whole pages of *The Ego and His Own* [1848] read like anticipations of Sartre.” A consequent meaning of Read’s question might be: In the history of anarchism where does Jean-Paul Sartre come in? Whole pages of *Being and Nothingness* read like resoundings of Stirner. The answer to the second question is: he doesn’t, but in many ways he ought to—a fact that makes his present position all the more perplexing.

Where Sartre *could* come in is with something like his analysis of the series being fused into a group—something classical anarchism never did succeed in explaining theoretically. How does a singly dissatisfied rebel in *insurrection* against the oppression of himself come together with other insurrectionists to form a *revolution*, which is not a single but a political and social act? (The distinction is Stirner’s.) Bakunin’s

answer was really none at all, merely a kind of quasi-Marxist magic—revolutions “come independently of all will and all conspiracies, and are always brought on by the natural force of circumstances”; “the spontaneous action of the masses”—which masked his own practical cultivation of those conspiracies of which revolutions are, he said, “independent.” The question is a pertinent one because of some facts about anarchist political philosophy that belie popular assumptions about what the classical anarchists believed about man: that man was an altruistic animal, cooperative by nature. In fact, their vision was quite close to Sartre’s.

About Stirner there is generally no quarrel here. The “Libertarian Egoist” taught that the individual realizes himself in the “combat of self-assertion” against others, seeing the others as objects, his own “property.” The picture is essentially that of those alien consciousnesses in *Being and Nothingness* in mutual aggression against, and objectification of, each other, each realizing himself in the combat of intentions. But Stirner is usually seen as something of a peripheral figure in the anarchist tradition, finding his uncomfortable place as the “lonely rhapsodist of the uniqueness of every human being,” as one historian of anarchism has put it. I suggest, however, that Stirner’s vision is there at the very center of anarchism.

Natural cooperativeness? There are of course statements that contradict that impression, a representative one by Proudhon, for instance:

Man is a tyrant or slave by his own will before he is made tyrant or slave by fortune; the heart of the proletarian is like that of the rich, a cesspool of babbling sensuality, a home of filth and hypocrisy....The greatest obstacle which equality has to overcome is not the aristocratic pride of the rich, but rather the undisciplined egoism of the poor.

But such an expression need be no more than rage and impatience with the overdue revolution. It is best to be attentive to a definition of man’s nature that is demanded by a basic tenet of all classical anarchism.

“No authority, no government, even if it be popular government; this is the Revolution.”—Proudhon. “Even if it be popular government,” the anarchists eloquently argued. To expect even the revolutionary idealist to remain honest in power was, said Bakunin, “like squaring the circle, an unattainable ideal.” Some such statement (with a distinction between government, “delegation of power,” and administration, “delegation of work”—Errico Malatesta) was made by all the classical anarchists. And it is tantamount to saying that power corrupts. But why should it, so absolutely, unless man is by nature imminently corruptible, native oppressor, *not* naturally cooperative.

If we wish to retain the notion of natural cooperativeness while retaining the absolute notion that *anyone* is corrupted by power, we have to endow the act of governing with some metaphysical quality: govern-

ment is more than those who govern. But anarchism dismissed this notion as, in Malatesta’s words, “a disease...called the metaphysical tendency.” “For us, the government is the aggregate of the governors”—an insight that does not keep him from arguing a page later that should the best gain power, they would become tyrants. Which is either to ascribe to government some metaphysical qualities beyond the aggregate of the governors, or to subscribe to a none-too-altruistic definition of human nature. So, again, how do these egoistical aggressors come together in collective action such as a revolution or, later, such as a commune?

It might be argued that there was a kind of “Third” implicit in anarchist analyses: the State itself that oppressed me, him, her,...Us. But, in fact, one of the basics of anarchist thought was that the State unifies no one except those who rule—sometimes; its natural function is either atomizing people or keeping them atomized; it cultivates what Sartre would later call *seriality*. What was missing from anarchism as a political theory was a convincing go at the kind of analysis that Sartre did attempt as long ago as *Being and Nothingness*, a theory to bridge between the ontologically egoistical individual and the possibility of collective action, outside the myth of a social contract so abhorrent to anarchism.

The purpose of this excursion into anarchist thought is to question the inevitability of Sartre’s neo-Marxism. Was he indeed, in the earlier works, cultivating a domain, taking an inventory, erecting certain structures, all of which are meaningless and merely ideological unless nourished by Marxism? I am not about to suggest that Sartre was really an anarchist instead, only that his earlier writings were perfectly congenial with that school of thought (and needed by it), more so than with Marxism. Similarly, a certain constitutional distrust (or so it seemed) of constituted power was perfectly congenial with the spirit of anarchism.

The fact, however, is that Sartre kneels to Marxism and offers an “ideology” as tribute. His announcement to a French Maoist interviewer in the concluding piece to *Between Existentialism and Marxism*—“Now I consider myself available for any correct political tasks requested of me”—is perfectly consistent with the Leninist apologetics (call it what it is) of the *Critique*.

But is there, though different from philosophical inevitability, something like poetic necessity to it?

It is remarkable in such a profoundly *political* philosopher as Sartre to find so little convincing concern with *authority*—that mysterious something that “legitimizes” certain behavior and not others, that is difficult to explain and resistant to questioning, but is assumed whenever we do more than merely describe an event, a course of action. Where *is* authority in Sartre’s scheme, rejecting as he does any transcendental values or any notion that legitimacy

derives from the long, deep past? We know better than to expect him to locate authority, as Plato tried to in the *Laws*, "which are our parents" (*Crito*)—bourgeois parents, he would answer, and that's that.

An "authority" he sees no need to rationalize arises for Sartre *ex nihilo* in the praxis of a group fused by a revolutionary project. As long ago as his 1946 essay "Materialism and Revolution," his first extended critique of Marxism, Sartre argued that since the revolutionary is willing to sacrifice his life—or others—for a future social order, the "antiphysis" ("a rational adjustment of human relationships" replacing "what has been produced blindly by nature"), that future "acts as a value for him." "What is a value if not the call of something which does not yet exist?"

Authority is located, then, not in the transcendental realm, in tradition, or whatever, but in the *future*! A religious visionary might say something similar, but would mean that the future Holy Commonwealth is a projection of, as it corresponds to, presently held values that derive from a transcendental source—or perhaps is a recovery of the true nature of things, a prelapsarian grace. But not so for Sartre: values are made, not derived or recovered. That future that justifies present action is being created by our acts. Those acts—dependent for their justification upon the future they are creating—are creating the source of their own justification. The end that justifies the means is being created by the means that need justification by the end. This is very tiring, and somewhat philosophically suffocating; but accept the magic for a moment.

When the group threatens to lapse into the *practico-inerte*, "authority" resides in the exercisers of the Terror. Holding the group together is the Terror. But if "authority" was originally the call of the future ("something which does not yet exist"), then by what right does the Terror presume to be authoritative when the future stops calling? And that, of course, is what has happened when the group threatens to disintegrate. Sartre's kind of "authority" doesn't really come into being until the call of values has failed. His position amounts to saying that violence or the threat of it is authority—which people *are* willing to say. But I rather agree with Hannah Arendt: "Since authority always demands obedience, it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or violence. Yet authority precludes the use of external means of coercion; where force is used, authority itself has failed." What Sartre calls authority, it seems to me, is not authority. Rather, it is the failure of authority.

Questions of authority are not academic. For it is a matter of sustaining one's vision amidst choices and decisions. Without some

stable sense of authority, one can grow incredibly fatigued, it seems to me—which is what I think happens to Sartre. Consider all he offers us: An Hobbesian vision of man, and at the same time a sentiment (that's all it can be, for it is grounded in no logical necessity for him) in favor of an *antiphysis* of "popular democratic" ideals; a rejection of transcendental values and all God-talk as sources of authority, a rejection of the mysterious notion that the passage of time can convey a kind of legitimacy (as Nathaniel Hawthorne put it, "custom, so immemorial, that it looks like nature"). no appeal to "human nature" itself, since that's the source of the antagonism that creates the difficulty in the first place. All of this becomes a burden one escapes by elevating political musculature, by equating authority, makeshift, with force, and then easing one's sensibilities by saying that any broken eggs are necessary for the realization of that sentiment (which, again, is grounded here in no logical necessity). Moving in circles may be fatiguing; or one may wander in circles *because* one is fatigued. Give me an arm, St. Vladimir Ilich.

The classical anarchists, subject to similar quandaries deriving from a theoretical definition of man that could not sustain their ideal of free mutualism, did not tire so thoroughly. The image of the seventy-eight-year-old Kropotkin lecturing Lenin on power and abuse comes to mind. Perhaps they were philosophically naive, intellectually too weak to take their presuppositions to the ultimate conclusions, or merely inconsistent. But perhaps, ironically, what one needs is an acceptance of inconsistency, if that's what it is, a willed belief in the metaempirical, a locating of authority in faith or custom or some such—imperfect perhaps, maybe only a higher or more poetic pragmatism, but more humane than the "sad-to-say-but" embrace of pragmatic force. And perhaps the truth is that Sartre is just too bloody consistent—about some things: no hankering after authority outside or beyond *the action which works right now at any rate*. By Chr—...By Something(?)! Here's the group; take the oath; respect the *terreur*; and let's see. By what authority should you behave in a certain way? By that of the oath you took that is legitimized by the Terror that enforces it. There is no particular difference between Sartre's view of "authority" and a famous saying of Mao to the effect that power comes from the barrel of a gun.

Whatever Sartre's socioeconomic sentiments, his political imagination is ultimately very old-fashioned—and in no particularly remarkable or refreshed way. What *is* remarkable is how adventurous, thrilling, even profound one can appear if one depicts the slow, tired descent into leviathan with revolutionary rhetoric.