

Willy Thompson

SARTRE



Renowned in his day as the most celebrated — and notorious — philosopher in Europe, the obituaries of Jean-Paul Sartre, who died in April, were inclined to portray an extinct volcano, a venerable sage now safely respectable, not least because his active influence had shrunk to vanishing point.

Yet the spontaneous reactions of grief and shock at the news of his death on the part of thousands who knew him only through his writings, the immensity of the funeral procession in Paris, reflect the stature of a thinker whose example as much as his ideas made and continue to make the most profound impression among those who encounter them. Within only the last year two books on his philosophy and politics have appeared in English.

From the mid 1950s, until illness incapacitated him a few years ago, Sartre applied his energies to the enterprise of recasting and reinterpreting Marxist social theory, rectifying its supposed omissions and cleansing the corruptions and accretions it had acquired at the hands of alleged vulgarisers from Engels to the present-day Communist parties. He made the attempt virtually single-handed, wrote and spoke voluminously in its pursuit. In spite of all that he is still best remembered — and rightly so — for an earlier phase in his career as the creator and propagator of the outlook on human consciousness and relationships which came to be termed atheistic existentialism. It was this achievement which made Sartre a world celebrity and assured his place among the century's most eminent philosophers. More remarkable, for an obscure and often difficult writer it brought him an enthusiastic popular following and turned him for a time into a fashionable cult figure both in France and beyond its borders.

When the nature of his work during this phase is considered, it is not too difficult to understand why it should have been so. From the time he began to write in the years before the war until twenty years later, Sartre reflected and expressed the dilemmas, anxieties and uncertainties of educated, questioning individuals — and the term 'individuals' is stressed — trying to orientate their lives and their

personal commitments in a world of wars, revolution, imperialism, Stalinism and latterly, threatened nuclear catastrophe. Such people compose a significant social group in most countries, especially economically advanced ones, and for them Sartre's original philosophy could light up their personal predicaments in a penetrating and challenging fashion, all the more so as he did not initially prescribe particular courses of action but rather a manner of responding to situations. It may be argued additionally, and I would do so, that the essential elements of these theories as well as fitting in admirably with a certain social mood are also true descriptions of some important aspects of human reality.

It is because Sartre was Sartre, in other words, because of the reputation he acquired as an existentialist philosopher, novelist and dramatist that his reformulations of Marxism have evoked widespread interest and commentary. In spite of the greatly enhanced status of theoretical Marxism in western Europe during the last two decades, there can be no doubt that if Sartre had commenced his intellectual career at the point that he began to engage with Marxism, then his impact would have been very limited.

Continuity

A continuity runs through Sartre's thinking and his later positions were meaningful, though not inevitable, projections of his earlier ones. The outlook implied in individualistic existentialism induced him to become a political polemicist and as the cold war thickened, to draw close to the labour movement, Communist parties and socialist bloc. This forms the opening and, I am convinced, the most significant and fruitful section of his intellectual journey. Nonetheless, he never abandoned his previous concepts and dissatisfaction with what he saw as the arthritic and mechanistic version of Marxism upheld by the French Communist Party led him on to a project of restatement and renewal with a doctrine of revolutionary spontaneity at its core. Upon the upheavals of May 1968 Sartre denounced what he saw as the betrayal by the PCF of the revolutionary potential embodied in the leftist student militants, which he believed might, had other choices been made, have fired the working class to seize power.

Subsequently his political attachments were to ultra-left groupings, principally the Maoists, although he remained too sensible to take the Chairman and great helmsman at his own immoderate valuation.

Sartre's writing prior to 1945 is probably best characterised as philosophical psychology (he himself called it phenomenological ontology). Its foundation is an account of how consciousness functions, indeed how it *must* function according to the logic of its being. The formulation here is defective however, for it implies that consciousness is some kind of a thing, while Sartre's exposition is founded on the insistence that it is not. Consciousness, he asserts, is

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always consciousness *of* something, of some material reality either present or in imagination. Consciousness has no reality apart from its contents — strictly speaking it is nothingness — the nothingness which gives the title to his major philosophical treatise published in 1943, *Being and Nothingness*.

Consciousness

How then is consciousness distinguished from its objects? By the fact that it is freedom that its mode of existence is perpetually choosing. Consciousness is always consciousness of something and the nothingness of consciousness chooses and cannot avoid choosing what

that something is to be. To imagine otherwise is self-deception, impelled by the fear which that unqualified freedom evokes. If as an individual I claim that my personality, attitudes and actions are the products of circumstances and not my responsibility, then I am indulging in what Sartre terms bad faith, for in reality I freely chose them. External circumstances can compel my physical body but not my thinking, and if I can think freely I can act in any way I choose up to the point of physical constraints.

The point being made is not affected by the nature of the reality I confront. Let us suppose for argument that God exists, that he has promulgated certain moral imperatives and that he will mercilessly punish anybody who violates them. That may well terrify me into keeping his commandments, but they do not become *moral* laws for me unless I freely choose to regard them as such. If I obey only out of fear they are nothing but arbitrary commands and prohibitions without any internal force.

Sartre's argument does not proceed by way of logical demonstration — which is not to say that it is in any manner irrational or mystical. Rather he describes situations and mental states in such a fashion as to convince the reader that consciousness can only operate in the way he claims it does. The famous illustration of nothingness in the form of absence refers to the disappointed expectation involved in not finding an anticipated face: 'To say that Pierre is not in the cafe is not the same thing as to say that Wellington is not in the cafe' — although the statements have precisely the same logical weight.

It might be reasonably objected that to insist as the earlier Sartre does on the unconditional freedom of every individual is a gross distortion of reality. People's behaviour is determined by a range of observable conditions; age, sex, nationality, social class, to name only a few. For a Marxist the principle looks like a flat denial of historical materialism. Such an objection, though perfectly valid in itself, misses the point, for Sartre was not undertaking a sociological investigation but exploring subjective experience. If I am brought up as a working class child I will, to be sure, be likely to choose certain modes of behaviour rather than others, but I do choose them. If I travel daily to the workplace it is because I choose not to be voluntarily unemployed and if I become unemployed in any case I can choose either resignation or struggle. I can, if I am a worker, choose to follow in the footsteps either of Harry Pollit or John Boyd, and nothing in my previous biography will determine it one way or the other.

These are the kind of themes which pervade Sartre's earlier work. His outstanding prewar publication was the novel *Nausea*, an imaginative masterpiece in which the narrator is compelled to recognise the contingency of physical objects and human relations, ie, that there is no external or divine necessity which compels things to be the way they are, they could equally well have been different. The statement that 'life is messy' is to be taken literally, the coherence and acceptability we impose upon it are fabricated by our own consciousnesses and, as the narrator accepts at the end, through our undetermined choice.

Commitment

Up to and including *Being and Nothingness* Sartre's writings had no obvious political resonance. The only positive value which could be deduced from them was that of 'authenticity', the conscious acceptance that what we are is what we have freely chosen to be. The inconclusively terminated novel sequence *Roads to Freedom* reflected his dissatisfaction with that position and the experience and solidarity of the war, a prisoner-of-war camp and the resistance introduced another concept into his philosophical framework, that of commitment. He reasoned that the commitment to freedom implicit in the nature of consciousness demanded that the potential for free choice be maximised, and that in turn implied a socialist programme

and an imperative upon socially aware individuals to promote it. Such commitment should be made without illusions, and that involved recognising the historical necessity of the Communist parties as the only effective vehicles of socialism, but in full awareness of their imperfections — an attitude not appreciated immediately by the French Communist Party.

The argument was pursued through the journal which Sartre was instrumental in founding, *Les Temps Modernes*, and a remarkable range of imaginative works centred on the theatre, culminating in *The Prisoners of Altona*, his allegorical condemnation of French torturers in Algeria and the society which produced them.

The charge that Jean-Paul Sartre was a petty-bourgeois intellectual was one he never denied, and such people formed his principal audience. But the criticism implied in such a definition is misjudged and inappropriate. Sartre at this period was well aware that he had neither the background or the standing to address the working class directly on the issues of most concern to it. Attempts by him to do so after 1968 turned out as fiascos. To campaign energetically among the progressive elements of the educated classes for their support to peace and socialism is a perfectly valid activity and what Sartre did up to 1956.

His later development, though still exemplary in the strength of his determination to go wherever the pursuit of truth took him, moved in a direction where his brilliant insights into subjective experience no longer sustained his argument. This is not to say that there are not extremely suggestive notions in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), the most 'Marxist' of his publications. The discussion of the progress of revolutionary bodies from spontaneity to internal coercive measures intended to preserve the organisation, followed by

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bureaucratic hardening, is certainly one which Marxists have to confront. The objective of significantly advancing Marxist theory however, is vitiated by the derivation of all class relationships and alienation in general from the notion of material 'scarcity'. Either this is factually mistaken so far as capitalism is concerned whose characteristic crisis is of overproduction and destruction of productive potential; or else — as Sartre tends to do — 'scarcity' is redefined and stretched so broadly (eg, scarcity of markets) that it becomes useless as an explanatory concept.

Political interventions

Sartre detested his status as a public monument, both out of personal good taste and on principle that such attribution limited both the freedom of the celebrity insofar as he was tempted to act up his reputation, and also of his audience, who acquired expectations which made them incapable of recognising the spontaneity and freedom of their hero. Very sensibly though, since he couldn't avoid it, he employed it for worthy ends; refusing the Nobel prize, putting his prestige at the disposal of the Russell tribunal on US war crimes in Vietnam and, in the 1970s, exercising it to defend radical publications (albeit of ultra-leftists) against state persecution.

In his closing years Sartre's political actions were sometimes bizarre, occasionally ridiculous. Yet even then they grew out of what will probably be regarded as his most significant legacy to contemporaries and the future — uncompromising honesty in all personal and political relations — principles which he both propounded and lived by. If existentialism appears passe today it is more because its key insights have become a taken-for-granted part of general culture than because it was ever refuted or discredited.

According to one obituary he died 'alone, in eclipse, without public suspense or fanfare.' Sartre would certainly have liked that. D