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Sartre for the twenty-first century?

David L. Swartz · Vera L. Zolberg

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Abstract By virtually dominating French intellectual life (literature, philosophy, culture) during the early post-World War II period, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) embodied what Pierre Bourdieu calls a “total intellectual” – one who responds to and helps frame public debate on all the intellectual and political issues of the day. During his lifetime and even after his death in 1980, Sartre’s thinking and political engagements provoked sharp reactions, both positive and negative, in France and abroad. Marxism, decolonization struggles, and violence are three key themes on which Sartre’s public positions continue to generate considerable debate – a debate that remains relevant today.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) is considered by many to be the “philosopher of the twentieth century.” He came to exemplify a certain form of public intellectual, what Bourdieu critically calls a “total intellectual,” by virtually dominating French intellectual life (literature, philosophy, culture) during the early post-World War II period. When France laid him to rest in 1980, a huge turnout of some 50,000 following in his funeral procession was called “the last demonstration of the 1960s.” The centenary of his birth some 25 years later in 2005 was less celebratory. Indeed, as Annie Cohen-Solal remarks in the opening article of this *Theory and Society* symposium devoted to Sartre, the French press, with few exceptions, overwhelmingly treated Sartre’s centenary negatively. Moreover, the contrast to 1980 was paralleled by another: Cohen-Solal juxtaposes the positive international recognition of Sartre’s contributions with the generally negative assessment at home.

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The striking disparity in France between the public outpouring for his funeral and the ambivalent nod toward the centennial of his birth only 25 years later may of course be partly due to the vicissitudes of intellectual fashion; indeed, even in his life time Sartre fell in and out of favor with the French intellectual world.¹ But the contrast to the interest outside of France may suggest more; namely, that “no prophet is accepted in his home country,” or as Cohen-Solal provocatively puts it: Sartre is a painful reminder of “buried taboos in the history of his country”; most notably, the legacy of its colonial past.

This is not to suggest that memory of Sartre outside of France has been uniformly positive, widespread, or enthusiastic. It is probably still the case, as Aronson (1987) noted in 1987, that the Sartre revival in the Anglo world is small and comes not from the academic or intellectual mainstream.² Still there are lively centers of Sartrean work and networks of scholars that concern themselves with his prodigious oeuvre. The vitality of ongoing scholarly interest in Sartre can be seen in the activities of numerous Sartrean societies, their meetings, and web sites. Active Sartrean groups exist in many different countries, such as Great Britain, Brazil, Italy, Japan, and the United States. Among the numerous internet sites, <http://www.jpsartre.org>, set up by Michel Rybalka and the GROUPE D’ETUDES SARTRIENNES (Sartrean Studies Group), is perhaps the most important with links to most all the Sartre-related publications and events in the world.

Whether the philosopher of the twentieth century will also be rediscovered as a key guiding intellectual figure in the twenty-first century of course remains to be seen. But there is already enough activity to suggest that Sartre will not soon be forgotten. His centennial offered an occasion for many to revisit and reassess aspects of his work. By devoting this symposium to four articles on Sartre, *Theory and Society* acknowledges the important influence that Sartre carries into the early years of this new century.

The articles in brief outline

The first article, “Sartre at his Centennial: Errant Master or Moral Compass” by Annie Cohen-Solal, author of an important biography of Sartre (Cohen-Solal 1987), identifies and attempts an explanation of the paradoxical and contrasting French and foreign assessments of Sartre on his centenary. Her article distinguishes some of the extreme voices against Sartre in France in contrast to the more positive and scholarly objective evaluations of Sartre abroad. She provocatively suggests that much of the negative commentary in France may in fact reveal discomfort – perhaps bad faith – of many French intellectuals in facing the legacies of hierarchy still permeating the Fifth Republic and the colonial past that Sartre so vigorously denounced yet still haunts contemporary France.

Not all French reaction has been negative and mass-media driven as Cohen-Solal charges. She acknowledges the ongoing scholarly attention given by the Sartrean Studies Group in France to the significance of Sartre’s life and work. Still she makes the telling point that a national media that often seems particularly attentive to defending the French voice in the world marketplace of ideas and culture curiously became so ambivalent about one of its own twentieth-century greats.

¹When I (David Swartz) arrived in Paris for study in the early 1970s, structuralism was all the rage; no one seemed to be reading Sartre, only watching his public political exploits!

²Indicative of continued Anglo-American scholarly interest in Sartre are books such as: Brown 2003; Santoni 2003; Aronson 2004; Boule 2004; Flynn 2005; Herter 2006; Solomon 2006; and Judaken 2007. See also McLemee 2003.

A spate of books in recent years shows that Sartre continues to attract scholarly attention. Paige Arthur in “Remembering Sartre” reviews three: the English translation of Lévy’s (2003) *Sartre: The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century*, Aronson’s (2004) *Camus & Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended it*, and Santoni’s (2003) *Sartre on Violence: Curiously Ambivalent*. Sartre’s thinking on violence is one of the key themes that Arthur extracts from these works and we take that up later in this introduction.

Gabriella Paolucci’s article “Sartre’s Humanism and the Cuban Revolution” offers insight into the third world radicalism phase of Sartre’s political activism as an intellectual. It analyzes widely neglected texts from Sartre’s brief visit to Cuba in 1960 and contends that they reveal much more than journalistic accounts by Sartre of the early period of the Cuban revolution. They also give evidence of Sartre’s further distancing from the official Marxism of the Soviet Union and European Communist parties and his enthusiastic embrace of the early phase of the Cuban revolution as a hopeful Third World alternative for socialist transformation. Paolucci believes that the Cuba visit motivates further Sartre’s political thinking and engagements that would stress more and more a practice-oriented freedom/humanism vision for a socialist project that could perhaps find expression only in the Third World.

The Cuba experience comes after the “fellow traveler” period of the early 1950s and in the heat of the Algerian decolonialization struggle. Sartre has embraced his own reformulated Marxism that would be a humanist Marxism with more emphasis given to the role of the individual and the dynamics of group solidarity than could be found in the official doctrines of the French Communist Party and the Soviet Union. What is striking in the Cuba texts is Sartre’s enthusiasm for what he sees in the very early phase of the reorganization of Cuba under Castro and this leads Sartre to theorize experience as putting practice prior to theory. It is the concrete needs faced in reorganizing the Cuban economy that appear to Sartre as an essential priority over theorizing the socialist alternative to capitalism. This is striking, as Paolucci points out, coming from someone who had long argued that theorizing was a way of doing politics!

In the final article, “Jean-Paul Sartre and the Philosophy of Négritude: Race, Self, and Society,” Bennetta Jules-Rosette draws attention to the influential if complex role Sartre played in the negritude movement of black intellectuals in Paris between the 1940s and 1960s. While considerable scholarship has focused on the relationship of Sartre to Frantz Fanon, and particularly the significance of Sartre’s “Preface” to *The Wretched of the Earth* (Sartre 1963 [1961]), Jules-Rosette broadens the scope of Sartre’s active engagement with black intellectuals involved in the anti-colonial struggles. In particular, Sartre published a two-page article entitled “Présence noire” in the inaugural issue of *Présence Africaine* (1947), a journal in which he argued for a legitimate black presence in European social and intellectual life. His “Black Orpheus” (1948) became a major theoretical reference point for black intellectuals.³ In that article, Sartre compares conditions of the European working class with blacks in France and in the French colonies. While oppression of the working class is economic and objective, it imposes a psychological or subjective dimension on blacks as well. Thus the struggle for liberation of blacks from racism in the former colonies

³Jonathan Judaken (Judaken 2008, forthcoming) situates “Black Orpheus” in the second of “four overlapping phases” in the development of Sartre’s thinking on racism. The first begins in the 1930s when, in his existential phenomenology, Sartre identifies anti-Semitism as “a paradigmatic form of bad faith in the face of the human condition.” He extends this line of thinking to race and increasingly comes to think of individual freedom as dependent upon freedom for all. In the second phase, Sartre comes to think more and more in terms of institutionalized racism that undergirds his early writings on colonialism and decolonization and “Black Orpheus” appears as he elaborates his thinking in this direction.

and in France calls for a cultural (expressive, literary, and psychoanalytic) as well as a political dimension. This gave inspiration to the negritude movement.

But Sartre also cast the liberation process in dialectical terms by arguing that identity politics were but a stage leading to the final ideal of a society without classes or racial distinctions (*sans races*). In other words, the literary and intellectual movement of negritude was a necessary stage or moment in the dialectical march toward liberation but ultimately was destined for its own self-destruction.⁴ His formulation for this lent support to the anti-negritude theories that would follow. Thus, as Jules-Rosette documents, Sartre offered inspiration to both the negritude and anti-negritude movements.

Three themes

The four articles published here evoke numerous themes relative to Sartre's life and work but we confine our attention to just three of these themes: Marxism, decolonialization, and violence.

Marxism

The complex and changing if not contradictory relationship Sartre developed with Marxist theory and Communist countries and political parties is difficult for North American intellectuals to understand, particularly for those without an appreciation of the French intellectual context in which Sartre worked. His embrace of Marxism after the early development of his existentialist thought, his brief fellow traveler period with the Soviet Union and the French Communist Party, his subsequent repudiation of official Marxism and its organizational supports, and his considerable effort to reformulate a Marxism informed by the existentialist stress on individual subjectivity and freedom may seem contradictory if not opportunistic. Even in France, critics are divided over their interpretations of Sartre's relationship to Marxism, and Cold War polemics continue to overshadow many evaluations of Sartre as Arthur points out to be the case in the work of Lévy (2003). Cohen-Solal also calls attention to the distorting influence of old Cold War skirmishes still being fought out in contemporary assessments of Sartre in France. A few brief remarks on the intellectual context in which Sartre worked, therefore, seem in order.

First, Marx and Marxism have been much more overt as important reference points for most European social theory – especially in France – than for the American tradition. Second, all French intellectual life after 1945 was influenced by a large group of Marxist intellectuals and the central role of the French Communist Party in political and cultural life (Bourdieu and Passeron 1967: 175). The French Communist Party emerged politically strong after World War II from its legitimacy of having participated in the resistance against the Nazi occupation and from having successfully organized major sectors of French industrial workers. Third, the centralized structure of the French intellectual field, as Bourdieu (1990) has noted, made it virtually impossible for French intellectuals not to come to grips with Marxism during the post World War II period, whereas the less centralized array of academic and intellectual focal points in North America and no significant socialist movement made Marxism a less obligatory theoretical reference point. Moreover, this period, corresponding to the height of McCarthyism, made it dangerous for academics,

⁴Judaken also notes that Sartre gave but qualified support to the negritude movement as a necessary phase, but only a phase, in the dialectic movement towards liberation.

teachers, and performers to adhere openly to the political left. And fourth, formed intellectually by a strong phenomenological influence, Sartre developed his own existentialist philosophy with emphasis on individual freedom and subjectivity that has no obvious elective affinity with historical materialism. Yet, Sartre came to the view after 1945 that Marxism and its institutional supports, in spite of their obvious shortcomings, were the only serious alternative to capitalism and American imperialism and devoted considerable effort to reformulate a Marxism with humanist subjectivity.

These articles, particularly those by Jules-Rosette and Paolucci, address in one way or another Sartre's critical dialogue, embrace, and modification of Marxism. Jules-Rosette reveals an important modification that Sartre brings to Marxism: elevating the subjective dimension of oppression to similar importance as the objective dimension. This permits Sartre to expand his concerns to marginal groups beyond the boundaries of the European working class and points to the importance of racial oppression at home and abroad as well as class domination. It also opens a window for a literary, psychoanalytical, and cultural identity voice that one will find among black intellectuals, not the least being the psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon, from the French colonies.

Paolucci argues that Sartre's version of Marxism was always marked by a forceful humanism and vision of human freedom that permitted him to view the early phase of the Cuban revolution in "situationalist" terms rather than the outflow of abstract theory. Nonetheless, she is struck by how Sartre's enthusiastic embrace of the early Cuban experience leads him to dispense with virtually all Marxist theorizing; indeed, in the words of Aronson (1980: 239), Sartre's early assessment of the Cuban revolution is simply "anti-Marxist."

Decolonization

A cursory review of recent Sartrean scholarship reveals another salient contrast: whereas French commentators seem more centrally concerned with his literary work, decolonization is a theme that has animated more discussion outside of France. All the articles published here reflect that theme.

In terms of visibility as an intellectual activist, Sartre was established as a "Third Worldist" by the 1961 preface to Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth* (Cohen-Solal 1987). But these articles stress, as others have, that Sartre was actively engaged in decolonization struggles, including Algeria, well before that moment.

Cohen-Solal suggests that the unresolved legacy of France's colonial past helps explain the ambivalence of many French intellectuals toward Sartre. It is rather easier to champion the cause of the West in the Cold War than to confront the results of French policies toward Africa and particularly the resulting implications for current immigration problems France now faces.

Arthur in particular stresses the importance of anti-colonialism struggles for Sartre. She proposes that decolonization, rather than the Cold War struggles and debates, is a better lens through which to view much of Sartre's later work and political engagements. Reviewing the important book of Aronson (2004), she calls for a post-Cold War frame for considering Sartre's work and sees the Aronson book moving significantly in that direction though not sufficiently so. The Cold War perspective tends to produce "dogmatic positions for or against communism" that distort assessment of Sartre's work, particularly to the extent that it was also shaped by colonialism; it also limits Sartre's prophetic relevance for the contemporary situation of globalization and US military intervention in Iraq.

Paolucci shows the importance of understanding developments in Sartre's thought as well as his public actions in terms of his engagements with anti-colonialism struggles. Her

analysis of the journalistic writing from his 1960 Cuba trip gives evidence of Sartre's shift in attention and hope from European Marxism and communist parties to opportunities for radical change in the Third World.

This orientation is present in the Jules-Rosette article that stresses the importance of colonialism and anti-colonialism in Sartre's thinking and work as she examines his relationship to African and Caribbean intellectuals, including Frantz Fanon, who were key figures in the negritude and anti-negritude movements.

Violence

Sartre's thinking (his qualified and varied justifications) on violence represents a key theme in the books reviewed by Arthur. Jules-Rosette also evokes the topic in her discussion of the relationship between Sartre and Fanon. While Sartre was one of the first to draw perceptive insight into the insidious and reactive effects of violence imposed by colonial regimes, his willingness to justify using physical violence against innocents as a means of attacking the violence of domination troubles many of his most sympathetic students, particularly in the case of Munich (1972) and in light of 9/11. Much of this concern centers around Sartre's famous and much debated preface to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. But, as Arthur critically suggests, this polemical text may not be the best starting or ending point for Sartre's thinking about violence. The preface amounted to "a muckraking, in-your-face text" designed to sensitize if not enrage the French about their colonial policies in Algeria. His *Notebooks for an Ethics* (Sartre 1992) and his 1964 "Rome Lecture" on the ethics of violence would be better places to find Sartre's more reasoned and reflective views on violence. Arthur, along with the Santoni (2003) book she reviews, concludes by characterizing Sartre's position on violence as "ambivalent." Independently, Jules-Rosette comes to the same conclusion in her article.

Sartre's debate and falling out with Camus appear to turn fundamentally on their contrasting views toward violence: whether violence should be justified for political ends. Camus said no, Sartre yes. But not entirely as Arthur contends. Their respective postures toward France's history of colonialism were also important. At stake was not only the violence of the former Soviet Union – a preoccupation of Camus – but also the violence of French colonialism, which Sartre contended created its own "counter-violence." Sartre supported the National Liberation Front, including its use of violence against civilians, and Camus, Algerian born, did not.

Aronson's excellent book situates better than any previous work the Camus/Sartre debate over violence in terms of both the debate over French colonialism as well as the Cold War. Arthur, however, suggests a provocative thesis for future research: Sartre's view on violence and his disagreement with Camus need to be understood in terms of debates over French colonialism, and particularly the Algerian War, as much if not more than of debates over the Cold War.

Arthur objects to the view of Sartre's old classmate, Raymond Aron, a perspective shared by many critics, that there may be a propensity for Sartre to embrace violence given his strong claim that negation and conflict stand at the very core of human experience. But does this philosophical stance lead Sartre to justify physical violence? Arthur contends that violence does not equal negation and that critics, such as Aron, have conflated the two thereby reducing important variation in Sartre's thinking regarding physical violence to just one position that could be easily polemicized. Rather, his justification of "revolutionary violence" against "systemic violence" of colonialism seems to be in tension with his strong philosophical arguments against the practico-inert, the objectification and the bad faith that

justifies it. And in the 1964 Rome lectures Sartre specifies certain limiting conditions for its deployment.

Sartre thought and wrote much about the ethics of violence, yet leaving an assessment of his views open to sharply opposing views: ranging from ambivalent and contextual to a “deep failure to see the dehumanizing aspects of the violent action he sometimes advocated or explained” or where he himself “selectively [justified] bad faith with regard to violence.” Sartre was one of the first to probe deeper than most into the forms and consequences of institutional violence of capitalism, colonialism, and socialism. His insights are prophetic and remain relevant to our contemporary world of globalization and terrorism. But he also affirmed as necessity anti-colonial violence and as a form of political therapy (particularly in his preface to the Fanon work). He refused to condemn terrorism and seemed to embrace violence as a dynamic of self affirmation. Violence appeared to Sartre as essential for changing those structures promoting institutional violence. Yet, in his early work he stresses that individuals always have a choice how they will respond to situations they are given and therefore even violence could be seen as a choice not a necessity and this would seem to hold even for oppressed peoples seeking liberation. Santoni (2003), in his excellent work that offers a considered evaluation on the topic, concludes that “ambivalence” seems the best way to characterize Sartre’s thinking on violence and Arthur agrees.

Conclusion

These four articles and the broader scholarship they reference point to the ongoing life and debate that Sartre’s actions and thought continue to generate. If the Marxism he felt he needed to come to grips with in the post-World War II era no longer holds the intellectual and political force it once did, the issues of colonial legacy and violence most certainly do. And the question he raised as to whether violence should be justified in overthrowing domination under certain conditions invites renewed attention in our post 9/11 world. Sartre may continue to challenge in this world of globalization, American military aggression, and terrorism. Certainly we find in the voices of these four articles the belief that his challenge is still there.

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