The Outrageous Optimism of Jean-Paul Sartre

BY
IAN BIRCHALL

The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre died forty years ago today. Sartre's philosophy and political values can still inspire struggles for freedom today.

April 15 is the fortieth anniversary of the death of Jean-Paul Sartre. I can still remember hearing the news. It was not unexpected — he had been seriously ill for some time — but it still came as a shock. For those of my generation who had made our way towards socialist politics in the 1950s and 1960s, Sartre had been a guide and an important influence, and he left behind an enormous body of work.

There were huge volumes on philosophy and Marxist theory, but also novels and plays that dramatized the philosophical questions and made them painfully concrete. Then there were political polemics, rooted in very specific situations. After his death, the discovery of unpublished manuscripts — among them a film script on Freud — revealed new aspects of this complex and prolific author.

"Condemned to Be Free"

Sartre is often presented as a pessimistic thinker. In his novel *Nausea*, he wrote: "Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance." Perhaps the best-known quotation of Sartre's comes from his play *In Camera* — "hell is other people." But if his starting-point seems bleak — we live in a godless, meaningless universe — the logic is that all meaning, all values, come from human beings, from ourselves. In Sartre's own phrase, we are "condemned to be free."

As Sartre himself noted, it was not his alleged pessimism that outraged people so much as his powerful optimism: his insistence that we are free to act, free to change the world, and hence that we are responsible for the world as it is — responsible for war, starvation, and oppression. The fact of this freedom, experienced not pleasurably, but as anguish, is central to all of Sartre's work, as are the strategies we develop to deny our own responsibility — what he called "bad faith."

Thus Sartre insisted that there was no such thing as a natural disaster: "It is man who destroys his cities through the agency of earthquakes." In a world without human beings, an earthquake would be of no significance: just a meaningless upheaval of matter. It is only when the earthquake comes up against human projects — roads, buildings, towns — that it becomes a disaster. It is a stark reminder that in the epoch of climate change, disaster results not from nature but from human choices, human ambitions, and human brutality.

In an article written in 1948, Sartre proclaimed his ambition to “write for his own time.” His aim was not to pursue universal truths, but to confront the reality of the world in which he lived. Its problems were too urgent to be neglected in favor of more long-term considerations.

In Time of War

To appreciate this, it is important to remember the world in which Sartre was active. Between 1939 and 1962, a period which covers much of Sartre’s work, France was only at peace for brief periods. First came the Second World War, during which German forces occupied the country, giving rise to an armed Resistance movement.

Scarcely had France achieved liberation than it was involved in two long and bitter wars, trying vainly to hang on to its vast colonial empire: an eight-year conflict in Indochina that led to humiliating defeat at Dien Bien Phu, followed by seven years of war in Algeria, characterized by brutality and torture. The violence in Algeria frequently spilled over onto the streets of mainland France.

In addition, from 1947 onwards, France was embroiled in the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, with the constant threat of nuclear annihilation. Small wonder that Sartre’s work from this period is constantly preoccupied with violence.

“Anything Except a Man”

In 1943, when he published his major philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre promised a sequel on moral questions. He never completed it, though a manuscript did appear after his death. Sartre was deeply concerned with oppression, in particular with racial oppression, which came to form a unifying theme running through many aspects of his work.

In 1945 he published a short book called *Anti-Semite and Jew*. Here Sartre focused, not on the Holocaust, which he barely mentioned, but on the antisemitism that was endemic in French society, and which explained why French people had often been enthusiastic in supporting and even encouraging the Nazi occupiers.

He showed that antisemitism had nothing to do with the existence of Jews. Rather, it was a product of the illusions of the antisemite: "If the Jew did not exist, the antisemite would invent him." Sartre demonstrated that the roots of antisemitism lay not in racial superiority, but in weakness:

> Antisemitism, in short, is fear of the human condition. The antisemite is a man who wishes to be pitiless stone, a furious torrent, a devastating thunderbolt — anything except a man.

In 1945 Sartre visited the United States. One of the things that attracted his attention was the extent of racial oppression in the country. However, he insisted that racism could not be separated from class, and that the black population must "struggle with white workers and on an equal footing with them for the recognition of their rights."

When he wrote his play *The Respectful Prostitute* — based on the 1931 Scottsboro trial of young black men in Alabama, who faced the death penalty on trumped-up charges of rape — some accused him of anti-Americanism for stressing the importance of racism in the United States. History was to prove that Sartre was more perceptive than his critics.

Against the Empire

In 1948, Sartre wrote the preface to an anthology of work by African poets edited by Léopold Sédar Senghor, a future president of Senegal. He began with customary savagery "When you removed the gag that was keeping these black mouths shut, what were you hoping for? That they would sing your praises?"

At the end of the Second World War, France still possessed the second largest colonial empire in the world, and almost all its politicians were determined to hang on to that empire. Yet within twenty years, after enormous brutality and bloodshed, it was effectively gone.

In the first years of the Algerian war, some of the most prominent figures of the French political left — Socialist Party leader Guy Mollet, Pierre Mendès-France, and the young François Mitterrand — belonged to the government that sent more troops to Algeria and ordered the executions of Algerian militants. When the government introduced "special powers" to deal with the crisis, giving the colonial Minister-Resident the right to rule by decree, even the French Communist Party (PCF) voted in favor. Meanwhile Sartre, well aware of the racist nature of French colonial rule, was among the first to oppose the war and then call for Algerian independence.

One might think he would get some credit for being quick to recognize that the French empire was obsolete. Instead, since his death, historians have subjected Sartre to repeated attacks, denouncing his alleged sympathies with Soviet communism. These include several whose work has a certain left coloration, such as the late British historian Tony Judt, the ex-Maoist Bernard-Henri Lévy, and Michel Onfray, who professes to be an "anarchist."

It would be quite wrong to claim that Sartre's record was impeccable — he could certainly be accused of major misjudgments and gross tactical errors. He was hardly the only European cultural figure to have had illusions in Stalinism: Bertolt Brecht and Pablo Picasso were guilty of worse.

However, the indictment of Sartre by his detractors consists not of reasoned criticism, but of a tirade of abuse, often on the basis of selective and misleading quotations. While Eastern Bloc Communism may be dead and gone, Sartre's critics seem to be anxious to signal their own virtue by refighting the battles of the Cold War.

Sartre and Camus

In particular, they often draw a contrast between Sartre and his contemporary (and erstwhile friend) Albert Camus. Sartre and Camus quarrelled spectacularly in 1952, when Camus published a book generally perceived as a rejection of the Marxist — more particularly the Leninist — tradition. Camus's admirers often exalt him as a paragon of anticommunist virtue. The reality is a little more complex.

Camus, the child of working-class European settlers in Algeria, had denounced some of the crimes of French colonialism in his earlier years. But he *never* supported Algerian independence (he died in 1960, before the war was over). Moreover, Camus's latter-day supporters sometimes find aspects of his radicalism embarrassing.

Just after his quarrel with Sartre, Camus wrote a very positive preface to a book called *Lenin's Moscow*, the memoir of Alfred Rosmer. Rosmer was a pioneer French Communist, later an opponent of Stalin, who had worked closely with Lenin and Trotsky in the early years of the Communist International. Camus's friends hardly ever mention this.

In fact, Sartre's relations with Communism and the PCF were a lot stormier than his critics would have us believe. In the period after 1945, the intellectuals of the PCF subjected him to repeated and violent attacks, afraid that his ideas were attracting support from students and other young people whom they hoped to draw towards their own ranks. Sartre suffered far more virulent attacks from this quarter than Camus did. One book by the PCF intellectual Roger Garaudy, in which Sartre figures prominently, was called *Gravediggers of Literature*.

In 1950, David Rousset, a former political ally of Sartre and himself the survivor of a Nazi camp, launched a campaign against concentration camps in the USSR. Sartre refused to support this, on the grounds that the campaign was being waged in the right-wing press, and that it failed to oppose camps in right-wing, pro-American regimes.

Sartre's enemies often allege that he did not condemn Soviet camps. In truth, he signed an editorial in the journal *Les Temps modernes* which stated that the existence of such camps, with as many as ten million prisoners, was an indictment of the Soviet system: "We wonder what reason we could still have for using the term socialism in connection with it."

The Main Enemy

In 1952, however, Sartre shifted his position. It was at the height of the Cold War: the French police had viciously attacked a Communist demonstration, and the PCF's acting leader was arrested for being in possession of two pigeons, with which, it was alleged, he was planning to communicate with Moscow. (Presumably the PCF leadership had slightly more sophisticated channels of communication.) There was even talk of banning the party altogether.

In this situation, when many of the PCF's former supporters were breaking their links with the party, Sartre announced his alliance with it. His logic was simple: the PCF had massive working-class support (five million voters, and the leadership of the biggest trade-union organization), and Sartre wished to stand by the organized working class. For him, what was happening in France was more important than what was happening in the USSR: in the words of the German Communist Karl Liebknecht, "the main enemy is at home."

It is certainly true that over the next few years, Sartre made some very unwise statements in defense of the Soviet Union. But the alliance was short-lived. In 1956, when the Soviet leadership sent tanks into Hungary to crush a working-class rising, Sartre's opposition was forthright and public, insisting that socialism "is not brought at bayonet point." Thereafter, his criticism of the USSR became ever sharper: he condemned "Soviet imperialism," and argued that the Soviet working classes should "take the power which has been stolen from them" by the country's rulers.

Sartre never joined the PCF, and indeed was very skeptical of all forms of party organization. But he recognized the need for collective action, and tried to explore ways in which an independent left could be organized. In 1948, when the Cold War was intensifying, Sartre played a central part in the attempt to set up a new political formation, the RDR (*Rassemblement démocratique révolutionnaire*, Revolutionary Democratic Assembly). In its founding statement, this movement declared itself independent of both Washington and Moscow:

> Between the rottenness of capitalist democracy, the weaknesses and defects of a certain social democracy and the limitation of communism to its Stalinist form, we believe an assembly of free men for revolutionary democracy is capable of giving new life to the principles of freedom and human dignity by binding them to the struggle for social revolution.

The RDR enjoyed brief popularity, but then collapsed under the pressures of the Cold War. It was the failure to establish a current independent of both power blocs that later led Sartre to side with the PCF.

Modern Times

A more enduring result was the founding in 1945 of the magazine *Les Temps modernes* (Modern Times), with which Sartre remained actively involved for the rest of his life. He built up a team of writers, and the journal was open to various currents of the far left. It published material by Victor Serge, an early supporter of the Bolsheviks who had been imprisoned under Stalin, and an account by Richard Wright of his experiences as a black militant in the US Communist Party.

Les Temps modernes played an especially creditable role during the Algerian war. Even before the conflict started, it had published a remarkable article by the anarchist Daniel Guérin titled “Pity for the Maghreb,” which predicted the coming war and the terrible impact it would have on French society.

The managing editor, Francis Jeanson, who had written a book about Sartre, abandoned his literary work to build an illegal support network for the Algerian rebels. In Algeria itself, the authorities confiscated *Les Temps modernes* no fewer than four times in 1957, a backhanded tribute to its courageous editorial stance.

The public championing of Algerian independence by Sartre unquestionably had an impact. He wrote for the influential anti-war journal *La Voie communiste*, and was one of the best-known signatories of the Manifesto of 121, which endorsed civil disobedience to stop the war:

> We respect and consider justified the refusal to take arms against the Algerian people. We respect and consider justified the actions of those French people who regard it as their duty to offer assistance and protection to Algerians oppressed in the name of the French people.

A growing number of young people conscripted by the state to fight in Algeria were unhappy with their assigned role. Ultimately the war ended because the French population was unwilling to continue it: the National Liberation Front never won a military victory. Sartre earned the respect of the most remarkable intellectual among the leaders of the Algerian independence struggle, Frantz Fanon, and wrote the preface to Fanon's most influential work, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

The upsurge of 1968 in France was very welcome to Sartre, and he signed one of the very first statements of support for the student movement. When that movement sparked off the biggest general strike in European history, the whole political scene shifted. Sartre began to associate with various Maoist currents, though he always denied being a Maoist himself. Rather late in life, he involved himself in direct activism. When the French authorities banned several revolutionary newspapers, Sartre sold those papers on the street, challenging the police to arrest someone as famous as himself.

The Judgement of Crabs

Sartre's career leaves us with more questions than answers — indeed, it can be argued that his work is valuable precisely for the questions that it poses, rather than the answers he supplies. His tangled and often contradictory stances on the Middle East, torn between sympathy for Israel as a Jewish state and support for Palestinian rights, offer just one example of a position where he can scarcely be taken as a political guide.

Yet the work of Sartre, though rooted in his own time, still has something to offer to our own, very different age. For example, he was preoccupied with the possibility of collective action. In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, he distinguished between people waiting for a bus, and the crowd that stormed the Bastille.

Those waiting for the bus are united in the same place, and have the same aim (to get on the bus); but in fact, because there is not enough space on board, each individual is an obstacle to the others. In contrast, those storming the Bastille — what Sartre called a "fused group" — are not only united by a common aim, but are dependent on the support of each other (I can't storm the Bastille on my own). How a fused group can come into existence remains a vital question.

For Sartre the fact of human freedom means there can be no predetermined outcome to history. As he wrote in the essay "Existentialism is a Humanism" in 1946:

> Tomorrow, after my death, some men may decide to establish fascism, and others may be so cowardly or so slack as to let them do so. If so, fascism will then be the truth of man, and so much the worse for us.

This is very much in the spirit of Rosa Luxemburg's alternative: "socialism or barbarism."

In his last play, *Altona*, the central character Franz tries to imagine how the future will judge our own period of history. However, as he looks centuries ahead, he finds no human beings to judge humanity, only a court of crabs. At the time, Sartre feared nuclear war, but we can easily imagine that only crabs will be left when rising sea-levels have submerged humankind. Sartre still speaks vividly to both our hopes and our fears.

CONTRIBUTORS

Ian Birchall is the author of *Sartre Against Stalinism* and many articles and essays on the work of Jean-Paul Sartre.

FILED UNDER

France

War and Imperialism / Literature

Jean-Paul Sartre