



# Situation (Sartre)

**Situation** (French: *situation*) is a concept developed by French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. It refers to "how ritualized action might be avoided or at least confronted consciously as contrary to the subject's freedom of nihilation".<sup>[1]</sup> It was first expressed in his 1943 work *Being and Nothingness*, where he wrote that:

[T]here is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom [...] There can be a free for-itself only as engaged in a resisting world. Outside of this engagement the notions of freedom, of determination, of necessity lose all meaning.<sup>[2]</sup>

Earlier, in his 1939 novella *The Childhood of a Leader* collected in *The Wall*, Sartre expressed the concept while referring to pranks, saying that they "have a revolutionary value. They disturb. There is more destructive power in them than in all the works of Lenin".<sup>[3][4]</sup>

Another famous use of the term was in 1945, in his editorial of the first issue of *Les Temps modernes* (Modern Times); arguing the principle of the responsibility of the intellectual towards his own times and the principle of an engaged literature, he summarized that "the writer is in a *situation* with his epoch." An influential use of the concept was in the context of theatre, in his 1947 essay *For a Theatre of Situations*, where he wrote that "if it's true that man is free in a given situation and that in and through that situation he chooses what he will be, then what we have to show in the theatre are simple and human situations and free individuals in these situations choosing what they will be".<sup>[5]</sup>

He then published his series *Situations*, with ten volumes on *Literary Critiques* and *What Is Literature?* (1947), the third volume (1949), *Portraits* (1964), *Colonialism and Neocolonialism* (1964), Problems of Marxism, Part 1 (1966), Problems of Marxism, Part 2 (1967), *The Family Idiot* (1971-2), *Autour de 1968* and *Melanges* (1972), and *Life/Situations: Essays Written and Spoken* (1976).

## Guy Debord, Letterist and Situationist International

Sartre's concept of *Situation* was reprised by Guy Debord at least since the times of the Letterist International.<sup>[6][7][8]</sup> In January 1954, the *Letterist International* declared: "The new beauty will be that of THE SITUATION, that is to say, *provisional* and lived".<sup>[9][10]</sup>

Claire Gilman called Sartre a "father figure" for the Situationist International, and wrote that "Sartre and his philosophy of the situation are fundamental to the SI's notion of everyday life authentically experienced".<sup>[11]</sup> The relationship between Sartre's philosophy of the situation and the Situationist International is clarified by Peter Wollen in his essay *Bitter victory*.<sup>[12]</sup>

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- Sheringham, Michael (2006) *Everyday life: theories and practices from surrealism to the present* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=wzhIAAAAMAAJ>), p.162
- Claire Gilman Asger Jorn 's Avant-Garde Archives, in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, p.201 and note 18 on p.210
- Peter Wollen *Bitter Victory: The Art and Politics of the Situationist International*, published in Elisabeth Sussman (1989) *On the passage of a few people through a rather brief moment in Time: The Situationist International 1957-1972*

## Further reading

- Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1973). "Théâtre populaire et théâtre bourgeois". Théâtre populaire. n° 15, 1955. Also in *Un théâtre de situations*.

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