

# Sartre and the Idea of Freedom in the Anti-Colonial Struggle

June 2, 2011



In the late 1960s it seemed to many almost certain that Jean-Paul Sartre would be remembered as the most important philosopher of the twentieth century and the most important public intellectual on the left of that era. Certainly it seemed so to me at the time. Sartre had in the 1930s taken Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* and its reactionary and religious version of phenomenology and transformed them in *Being and Nothingness* into his new humanist philosophy of existentialism, a leftwing philosophy of freedom. Sartre lived out that freedom with his personal commitment to the French resistance to Nazism during World War II and then amplified its meaning in a massive literary output of essays, plays, and novels during the post-war period.

Throughout the 1950s, driven by a desire to put himself on the side of the working class and revolution, Sartre wrestled with the question of Stalin, the Soviet Union, and the Communist Party, became for a while their defender, and then eventually broke free of their hold on him. As the editor, together with his companion Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, of *Les Temps Modernes* during this period, he became the intellectual spokesman of the left, excoriating the establishment and rallying the intellectuals. Then in the 1960s and 1970s, turning his analysis to French imperialism, Sartre emerged as perhaps the leading French intellectual supporting colonial struggles against the French and then the American empires, the man often seen at the time as the voice in the metropolis of the struggles in the Third world as well as of the immigrant in French society. Yet, in the span from the 1970s to the 1990s, a systematic attack on Sartre and other leftwing French intellectuals and "totalitarian" thinkers succeeded in demolishing Sartre's reputation and that of many of his contemporaries.

Paige Arthur, the Deputy Director of Research at the International Center for Transitional Justice, invites us to reconsider Sartre, his reputation, and his contribution to political philosophy and to human liberation. She suggests that focusing on the often neglected subject of his writings on colonial peoples, Third World struggles, and immigrants in Europe will lead us to a new appreciation of Sartre. Her book, based on and still bearing the marks of her U.C. Berkeley dissertation in intellectual history written several years ago, locates Sartre's thinking and writing between the 1940s and the 1970s within the context of French intellectual, social, and political history. By doing so, she successfully demonstrates that his relationship with the colonial and Third World liberation movements made a unique contribution to his thinking, and that his thinking also made a unique contribution to French and world intellectual currents concerned with freedom struggles.

For many of us of the generation of the late 1960 and early 1970s, Sartre was a hero. Reading this book inevitably led me back to my own engagement with Sartre's ideas as a student in those years. I had a brushing acquaintance with Sartre and de Beauvoir during my undergraduate years in the early 1960s, having read on my own pieces of *Being and Nothingness* and some of their popular essays on existentialism. Later in 1969, while studying literature at the University of California at San Diego, in my first graduate seminar, a course taught by Fred Jameson on *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, I was suddenly plunged into Sartre's thought. That massive 750-page book in tiny print and difficult French, written in the 1950s and published in 1960, attempted to reconcile

Marxism with its emphasis on the determining role in history of economic and social structures with Sartre's own existentialism and its stress on individual human freedom in the face of death. The encounter would leave me an existentialist Marxist, convinced by Sartre that Marxism and existentialism—together with the Freudian psychoanalysis—provide a more complete understanding of the dynamics of human life than any one of them alone. (Herbert Marcuse, author of *Eros and Civilization*, was also at UCSD when I was there, and all of us were reading Wilhelm Reich's books and his Sex-Pol Essays.)

Arthur places at the center of her book *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* which I had read back in 1969 with its account of the contest between, on the one hand, the "practico-inert" of inherited social structures and, on the other, the "group-in-fusion," representing movements for social change attempting to overcome those structures. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre had developed a philosophy which revolved around the dynamic relationship between self and Other, and which consequently could not adequately address social and historical issues. Then, later, in order to account for society and history, Sartre in *The Critique* developed a theory of social groups and historical change. Clearly influenced by Marxism, *The Critique* argued that social reality, particularly social institutions, provided the parameters of human choices, choice about actions that were taken by groups, but as a result of decisions ultimately made by individuals.

At the same time, *The Critique* provided a bridge between Sartre's early writings on race issues, such as *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1945), and his later writing on colonialism. While Sartre addressed the social problem of anti-Semitism in his powerful and famous little book, arguing the inert rocklike character of the anti-Semite's beliefs, he had not yet created his own philosophical structure to account for society, group attitudes and behavior, or social change. His companion, Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex* (1949), preceded Sartre in the development of a more historical and complex account of group attitudes and actions as she attempted to account for the historical oppression of women. Sartre struggled with these questions and others during the 1940s in his *Notebooks for an Ethics* but, disappointed with the inconclusive results, left the book unpublished; it was published posthumously in 1980. He did not finally get these things clear in his mind until the end of the 1950s. *The Critique* then represented a synthesis of Sartre's thought on both the nature of society and social change and also on colonialism and resistance to it, though the latter has often be overlooked and Arthur is to be thanked for bringing it to our attention. At the same time, *The Critique*, can be read as an analysis of Stalinism and the Soviet Union which was the beginning of the end of Sartre's flirtation with Soviet Communism and with the French Communist Party.

Sartre wrote a great deal on the French wars in Algeria, which became the turning point in twentieth century French history. Placing himself squarely on the side of the Algerians, Sartre argued that European colonialism arose from racism, the search for low-wage labor, and the imperial armies' violence. In doing so, Sartre and a whole generation of French intellectuals and students moved to the left of the French Communist Party. Sartre, beginning in 1957, accused the Communists of following the Socialists who in turn were following the lead of the French imperial state. When by the early 1960s the Algerian War had led to a deep political crisis with French colonists, French military units, and the French right driven to engage in armed attacks in France itself, de Gaulle's government recognized Algeria's independence in 1962. Ironically, de Gaulle's recognition of Algerian independence removed the principal issue around which the far left had emerged. With the end of the war in Algeria, however, Sartre and other leftwing intellectuals turned to the critique of the role of the United States in Vietnam, opposing America's global ambitions. Above all Sartre became the intellectual defender of armed struggle against imperialism.

Arthur discusses the way that during the 1960s and 1970s Sartre developed a defense of guerrilla warfare in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, while he drew a rather blurry line between guerrilla warfare which he supported and terrorism which he suggested he didn't. Sartre ultimately became, Arthur writes, the French and international spokesman for Third Worldism, or for a version

of it, one which attempted to link the struggle for socialism in the Third World to fights for democracy and socialism at home. Eventually this led Sartre, in his way, to Maoism, largely, Arthur suggests, because of his analysis of the situation of French immigrants as victims of a kind of colonialism or neocolonialism within France itself, a position the Maoists shared. In 1970 Sartre became the editor of the Maoist *La Cause du peuple*. Sartre's indictment and conviction in November 1973 for defamation, making death threats, and justifying the use of explosives to cause destruction resulted in nothing more than a 400 franc fine, but it represented the end of an era.

A new group of intellectuals arose, some on the far right and some linked to the Socialist Party, who began to attack Sartre, the Communists, and the Marxist revolutionary left, accusing them all rather indiscriminately of "totalitarianism." All of the issues sound very contemporary. The attack on Sartre came in large measure from his defense of immigrants whose very presence challenged the traditional French definition of terms such as the people, democracy, fraternity and equality. Sartre's essay "The Third World Begins in the Banlieu" brought home his analysis of colonialism and neocolonialism, once again arguing that immigrants faced racism, low wages, and violence at home as they had in the colonies. When a young Arab was shot in France, Sartre wrote an essay, in a country that believed it was free from racism, entitled "The New Racism," signed by himself and 137 other intellectuals.

The Biafra War in Nigeria in 1970 proved to be a turning point in France for thinking about the Third World just as Alexander Solzhenitsyn's novel *The Gulag Archipelago* (French edition 1974) led many to a rethinking of Soviet Communism. "Totalitarianism" within this political context came to refer to Soviet Communism, Maoism, and Third World governments, all of them grouped together without distinction and counterpoised to the international agencies and NGOs which represented the humanitarian alternative—backed up by the United Nations, NATO, and various national armies. Francois Mitterand's leadership in the French Socialist Party and its alliance with the Communists in 1972 led to the consolidation of a new reformist left in France, and to the marginalization of Sartre's sort of radical leftism. While the new right of Jean-Marie Le Pen and his National Front organized against immigrants, the new reformist left tended to support France's reassertion of its role in its former colonies, rejected Third World governments as inevitably corrupt dictatorships, and supported the notion of international humanitarian interventionism.

The defeat and collapse of much of the far left, the barrage from the right, and the consolidation of Socialist Party reformism spelled the end of Sartre's 40 years as France's leading left intellectual. As Paige Arthur suggests, there are good reasons to go back and reexamine his career. One might only wish that she had in her book spent more time on thinking about Sartre's struggle with Stalinism and ultimate rejection of it, and the relationship of that to his turn to the Third World. In any case, this book, written in an academic style and leaving no intellectual stone on the beach of French thought unturned, does an excellent job of examining Sartre's intellectual and political development through the lens of his involvement in the anti-colonial movement.