

## Sartre's Second Century



# Sartre's Second Century

Edited by

Benedict O'Donohoe and Roy Elveton

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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To  
Heather  
and to  
Kevin and Solveig



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## INTRODUCTION

### ROY ELVETON AND BENEDICT O'DONOHUE

It is reasonable to claim—as does Bernard-Henri Lévy, for example, in the title of his landmark study, *Le Siècle de Sartre* (2000)—that the twentieth century was “Sartre’s century”. But what might be Sartre’s legacy to the twenty-first?

Sartre’s life encompassed two world wars, together with the Cold War that dominated the latter half of the twentieth century. As a political activist and prolific political commentator, Sartre was both immersed in, and an engaged reporter of, the significant events of his century. *Being and Nothingness*, a philosophical best-seller, confirmed the 1950s as the “existentialist” age—and the age of anxiety—and sounded themes that reverberated in much literature, poetry, film and philosophy. Sartre the phenomenologist extended the relevance of continental European philosophers such as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Sartre the Marxist philosopher, initially siding with Stalin’s Russia, voiced his support for the proletariat and the victims of colonialism, and effectively aligned his public stances with important themes of western democracies, such as the fight against racism and the centrality of individual freedom. Although philosophical culture in the later twentieth century tended to celebrate the work of Heidegger and Wittgenstein above that of Sartre, a good deal of Sartre’s philosophical contributions have become standards of philosophical culture: “bad faith”, “authenticity”, “the look”, the themes of consciousness and intentionality, to name only a few.

A second dimension of Sartre’s enduring significance is his reliance upon the resources of literature—in the forms of drama and the novel, biography and autobiography—and, together with the requirements of ontological analysis, the study of history and historical events, and engaged political commentary. The pathways leading to his exploration of freedom are as diverse as is the richness of their content. The novel and the theatre offer vehicles for communicating the metaphysical depths of human experience that Sartre’s ontology, historical analysis and dialectical methodology may supplement, but not replace. Is there an educated westerner who cannot quote: “Hell is other people”? Sartre’s work is

unique in embracing such a diversity of genres. The sheer variety of those methods will surely continue to encourage a unique breadth of readership.

A third reason for the likely vigour of Sartre's "second century" is the fact that the great creativity of his later years has only recently been made available. Though unfinished, his *Notebooks for an Ethics*, for example, can be read as, at least, a sketch of the study of ethics promised in the concluding chapter of *Being and Nothingness*. Likewise, though unfinished, the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* appears to signal a considerable shift in his ontology of human consciousness, the "for-itself". Taken together, *Notebook* and *Critique* can prompt a serious re-reading of *Being and Nothingness*, no doubt Sartre's most famous work. Great works of literature and philosophy invite continued study and reinterpretation, in the light of repeated close readings and the products of subsequent writers and thinkers. The last century had only just begun the careful study of these late manuscripts. Sartre's "second century" offers the possibility for a substantial re-reading of his entire *œuvre*.

The centenary of Sartre's birth in 2005 was the primary occasion for many of the essays collected in the present volume. Hosted by the UK or North American Sartre Societies, contributors participating in Sartre's centennial celebrations were asked to address the central themes and overall development of his life and thought. It was to be expected, then, that there would be a retrospective dimension to these contributions. However, it quickly became apparent that attempts to view Sartre in a synoptic and retrospective light *also* provided a basis for assessing aspects of his work that are important *here and now*, and would probably remain so for the new century.

Thus, the following essays reflect the richness of Sartre's vision of the human condition, the diversity of the means he employed in grappling with it, and the lengthy trajectory of his enquiry, in a variety of wider cultural perspectives. Is Sartre a humanist? How persuasively can he be read as a romantic, a nihilist, an existentialist, a phenomenologist, a post-modernist? Are there significant cultural traditions that Sartre effectively advances by whole-heartedly embracing them or by substantially modifying them, or even by fusing or transcending them? How is it possible to bring him into fruitful dialogue not only with a living Japanese novelist, but also with contemporary movie-makers in Tokyo and Hollywood? What was his life, what was his death? What is his legacy in an "era of obscurantism"? Given the multi-layered quality of that legacy, such questions are less a matter of historical labels than of measuring the plurality of themes, motifs, approaches and genres that make up Sartre's unique bequest.

It is difficult to imagine that Sartre's preoccupation with the question of human freedom would not remain crucial for the continued influence of that bequest. His treatment of this central theme is complex and nuanced. *Nausea* and *The Flies* present human freedom as unsettling and disruptive. *Being and Nothingness* couples his ontological account of freedom with distinctive phenomenological descriptions of freedom in its embodiment, temporality and intersubjectivity. *Notebooks for an Ethics* relates freedom to ethical, social and political themes. The unfinished *Critique of Dialectical Reason* fuses the freedom of the for-itself with the objective structures of society and material existence. The biographies of Genet and Flaubert offer detailed accounts of historically situated freedoms. These diverse approaches to the fundamental question of individual human liberty comprise a multi-facetedness of vision, an acuity of perception, and an elegance of expression that will guarantee its continued relevance for the generations of the twenty-first century.

No less so, we assert, will Sartre's salient translations of his theoretical stances into the practical sphere of political writing and action: for, if the obverse face of the coin is freedom, its reverse is responsibility. Where (alas!) is there a playwright of genius capable of stigmatising torture in Guantanamo Bay, or anywhere else, as Sartre denounced French brutalities in Algeria with the allegorical *Condemned of Altona*? Where is the committed global intellectual capable of denouncing illegal wars and their concomitant crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan—"the world's richest nations bombing the world's poorest"—with the eloquence of Sartre, chairing the Russell Tribunal on American genocide in Vietnam? Where is the unsurpassed polemicist capable of writing a fitting sequel to Sartre's "Élections, piège à cons" ("Elections, idiot-traps"), critiquing the grotesque distortions of supposedly democratic systems that gave the world Tony Blair and George W. Bush? If Sartre could write his devastating "Preface" to Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, spectacularly exposing the murderous colonialisising mindset, in 1961, why—almost fifty years later—can we not find a worthy successor to decry the hegemonic western institutions that continue to hold poor African nations in thrall? And if Sartre, sometimes called "the first third-worldist", could write (as early as 1970!) a coruscating piece entitled "Le tiers monde commence en banlieue" ("The Third World starts in the suburbs"), why, nearly forty years on, is that still true—not only in France,

but throughout western Europe and in the US—and who will say so? “There is somebody missing here: it’s Sartre.”<sup>1</sup>

It is incumbent upon those of us who read and discuss Sartre to keep asking such questions, to make his voice ceaselessly heard, *in absentia*: there is never a good time for not asking difficult questions, and the irrepressibly contestatory (and incorrigibly self-contestatory) discourse of the pugnacious little polymath, Sartre, was never more needed than now. Whilst predominantly American and British forces enter their sixth year of illegal occupation of countries in the Middle East; whilst the “free market” of western capitalism—allegedly, irreversibly triumphant over Eastern Bloc communism only twenty years ago—finds itself (at the time of writing) apparently in complete meltdown; whilst some partially medieval regimes—China (murdering up to 8,000 of its own citizens annually for petty offences), or India (with its handful of super-rich and tens of millions of super-poor), or Saudi Arabia (still forbidding women to go out alone, much less vote)—continue to earn the fawning respect of post-Enlightenment western democracies, where is Sartre? *Vivant* (alive), as he himself wrote in his touching tribute to the lately deceased André Gide, for example.<sup>2</sup>

In the absence of any comparable colossus, however, the onus is on us (as the word suggests) to keep asking awkward questions. Not merely to turn political satire into harmless TV comedy (like Jon Stewart in the US or Rory Bremner in the UK), nor even to campaign earnestly, if not always effectually (like the brilliant and admirable journalists, John Pilger in the UK or Michael Moore in the US), but at least to keep interrogating—like Voltaire, like Hugo, like Zola—the mindless clichés of a smug bourgeois, or first-world, elitism. What is a “terrorist”? And what an “extremist”? And what a “fundamentalist”? And what an “asylum-seeker”? And what an “immigrant”? And what a “refugee”? Are we really “all middle-class now”? Who cares, and what would it matter? We *need* a Sartre to question the unthinking shibboleths of a self-deceiving western quietism, of a consumerist capitalism radically “in bad faith”, and to do so by way of every available medium. For want of any obvious successor—Bernard-Henri Lévy is manifestly more photogenic than Sartre, but markedly less subversive—Sartre himself must continue to speak to the present age, and he still has plenty to say that we would do well to heed.

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<sup>1</sup> “Il y a quelqu’un qui manque ici: c’est Sartre” (Sartre, *Les Mots*, Paris : Gallimard, 1964, 93).

<sup>2</sup> The time of writing being October–November 2008, it is with relief and optimism that we welcome a shaft of light suddenly penetrating this gathering gloom, namely the election to the US Presidency of Senator Barack Obama.

We venture to hope, therefore, that the present collection—bringing together essays by promising postgraduates, young academics in their prime, established and emeritus professors as well as formally retired scholars from the UK, USA, Canada and continental Europe, and covering many aspects of Sartre's astoundingly multi-dimensional work—will play some small part in making Sartre's indispensable voice heard in this, his “second century”.



# CHAPTER ONE

## SARTRE: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

### DAVID DRAKE

Paris, Saturday 19 April 1980. An estimated 50,000 people are lining the streets of the capital to pay their final respects as the funeral cortege of the most important French intellectual of the twentieth century wends its way to Montparnasse cemetery. Jean-Paul Sartre eclipsed all his fellow-intellectuals not only in terms of the fame and notoriety he enjoyed, but also in the sheer volume and variety of his *œuvre*. For example, Albert Camus, like Sartre, was a novelist and a playwright but a lightweight as far as philosophy was concerned; Maurice Merleau-Ponty was a serious philosopher but, unlike Sartre had no literary aspirations. Nor did Raymond Aron, the self-styled *spectateur engagé* (committed spectator) whom Sartre had known during his student days, make any claims as a literary figure. He, like Sartre, penned articles on contemporary politics, but his sober liberal writings were the antithesis of Sartre's polemical prose. How and why did Jean-Paul Charles Aymard Sartre, born in Paris on 21 June 1905, become one of the most famous Frenchmen of modern times? This is the question that this mini-biography will attempt to answer.<sup>1</sup>

Following the death of Jean-Paul's father, a mere fifteen months after Sartre's birth, Jean-Paul and his mother were obliged to move in with her parents, first in the Paris suburb of Meudon and later in a flat near the Sorbonne University. Jean-Paul was a rather sickly child and, around the age of three or four, an infantile infection caused him to lose most of the use of his right eye. "Poulou", as Sartre was known within the family, had a very isolated early childhood: he only attended school very intermittently and until the age of ten remained alone with an old man (his maternal grandfather) and two women (his maternal grandmother and his mother). He was largely educated at home by his grandfather, a former teacher who

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter was contributed by the author at the invitation of the editors.

had come out of retirement in order to fund his newly-expanded household. For his part, Sartre would later claim that he had taught himself to read and write on his own and was soon writing stories inspired by the tales of derring-do that he loved reading.

In his autobiography *Les Mots* (*Words*), Sartre asserts that this passion for writing that he discovered at an early age provided him with a justification for his existence. In October 1915, he enrolled at the Lycée Henri IV, and by the end of the year was deemed to be excellent from every point of view. In April 1917, Sartre's mother remarried, this time to Joseph Mancy, a factory manager. Sartre was mortified: another had appropriated his mother, who had been more like a sister to him. A month later, M. et Mme Mancy—with Sartre in tow—moved to La Rochelle, where Mancy took up a new post as head of a shipyard and Sartre started attending the local boys' *lycée*. He would later describe the next three or four years as the worst years of his life. He had been snatched away from new-found school-friends in Paris, including Paul Nizan, who shared his passion for writing. He disliked and continued to be jealous of his stepfather. Mancy, for his part, was hostile to Sartre's literary aspirations and attempted to steer him towards science and maths. Furthermore, Sartre found it difficult to adjust to his new school, where the perception of him as a precocious Parisian led to him being subjected to much bullying. His unhappiness led him to abandon his efforts at writing and, in 1920, although his school results were quite satisfactory, his mother and Mancy decided to send him back to school in Paris, where he would be away from "bad influences".

Sartre was now reunited with Nizan and the two became inseparable. While they pursued their secondary school studies, they discussed literature endlessly and, importantly, they wrote. In 1924, both Nizan and Sartre passed the competitive entry examination to the prestigious École Normale Supérieure (ENS) that, Sartre later observed, marked the beginning of his independence and the start of four years of happiness. At the ENS, although he decided to specialise in philosophy, he read as widely as he did voluminously, devouring contemporary literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis, psychology, sociology, in an attempt, as he expressed it, to become the man who knows most. His reputation as a diligent worker with a frighteningly powerful intellect co-existed with that of an anti-authoritarian rebel renowned for his pranks against symbols of authority and convention. However, while his friends turned towards political commitment—Raymond Aron towards the socialists of the *Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière* (French Section of the Workers' International, or SFIO), and Nizan towards the French Communist



Party (PCF)—Sartre displayed no such inclination. He remained a rebel but, for the moment, a rebel without a cause.

In 1928, to the astonishment of his fellow-students, Sartre failed the final exam (*l'Agrégation*) because, he later said, he had tried to be too original. The following July, while revising for the re-sit, he met Simone de Beauvoir, known to her friends as *le Castor*,<sup>2</sup> and who was to become his life-long companion. Soon after the publication of the exam results—in which Sartre came first and Beauvoir was placed second—Beauvoir accepted Sartre's terms for their relationship. They would not get married, nor would their relationship be monogamous: theirs would be “a necessary love”, but they would also experience “contingent loves”.

After completing his military service, Sartre took up a post as a philosophy teacher at the *lycée* in the port of Le Havre, while Beauvoir was appointed to a girls' school in Marseille, hundreds of miles away. Since the *Agrégation* was the highest teaching qualification, working in a *lycée* was the logical progression from the ENS. And yet Sartre had mixed feelings about the prospect. On the one hand, it was not too onerous, a secure job that offered a reasonable salary and long holidays which would allow plenty of time for writing and travelling. On the other hand, as a teacher, he would be expected to be an authority figure who enforced rules and regulations and set an example to his pupils. Furthermore, by now Sartre had extended the deep antipathy he felt for his stepfather to the class of which he was a typical representative, namely the bourgeoisie. Sartre tried to square the circle of his new situation by living in a somewhat run-down hotel near the station and refusing to conform to the role of teacher as it was conventionally defined. Not only did he give a talk at the end-of-year prize-giving ceremony on the cinema, which was definitely not considered a “proper” topic, but he also adopted a very relaxed manner with his pupils in school, and went drinking and playing cards—and even visited a brothel with them—outside class. It was shortly after his arrival in Le Havre that he began his work on what he called his “factum on contingency”. The book, which was both literary and philosophical (and would become *La Nausée*), was set in Bouville (“Mudtown”), a French provincial port that drew on both La Rochelle and Le Havre.

Sartre spent the academic year 1933-34 in Berlin while Raymond Aron replaced him at Le Havre. Aron had talked to Sartre about the German philosopher Edmund Husserl and phenomenology. Sartre was keen to find out more about Husserl's notion of intentionality that posited that

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<sup>2</sup> A punning conceit: “castor” means “beaver” (cf. “Beauvoir”) in Latin, and beavers are notoriously industrious, as was Simone de Beauvoir.

consciousness is always conscious *of something*. In Berlin, Sartre's main intellectual activities involved engaging with Husserl's writings and working on his novel on contingency. While he found himself in agreement with much of Husserl, Sartre concluded that the ego was not located within consciousness, as Husserl contended, but was itself an object of consciousness. When he was not writing and researching, Sartre spent much time hanging around in the bars and cabarets of the capital, apparently little concerned by the political drama unfolding around him, following Hitler's seizure of power the previous January.

In the autumn of 1934, Sartre returned to Le Havre in time for the new academic year. Despite the fact that Beauvoir was now teaching in Rouen, only an hour away, Sartre was soon plunged into depression. He disliked being a teacher and saw himself as a balding, portly, failed writer. This sentiment was reinforced when, in 1936, Gallimard rejected his novel on contingency. In the course of the same year, Sartre and Beauvoir formed an intense three-way relationship with Olga Kosakiewicz, a former pupil of Beauvoir's, upon whom Sartre became fixated. Beauvoir later published a fictionalised account of this episode entitled *L'Invitée* (*She Came to Stay*). Sartre supported the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War, which had just begun, and welcomed the victory of the Popular Front in France, although he had abstained from voting. But despite his sympathy for leftwing or progressive causes, Sartre continued to abstain from political activity.

By 1937, Beauvoir had secured a teaching job in Paris while Sartre was now teaching in the well-heeled western suburb of Neuilly. Both were living (in separate rooms) in a hotel in the 14<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* of Paris, and Sartre's future as a writer was now looking more promising. In 1936 his book entitled *L'Imagination* appeared, and the following year saw the publication of his critique of Husserl, *La Transcendance de l'ego* (*The Transcendence of the Ego*), and of a short story, "Le Mur" ("The Wall"), which appeared in France's most prestigious literary review, *La Nouvelle Revue française* (*NRF*). Other short stories appeared in 1938 and were subsequently published in a single collection as *Le Mur*. In 1938, Gallimard finally published Sartre's work on contingency, whose title had been changed from Sartre's *Melancholia* to Gallimard's *La Nausée* (*Nausea*). *Nausea* is the record of Antoine Roquentin's attempts to understand the nature of a deep sense of unease that he periodically experiences. After considering and discarding various hypotheses, Roquentin understands, in a blinding insight, that everything in the world, including himself, is contingent, that is to say exists without any *a priori* reason: it just *is*.

By the end of the 1930s, Sartre was beginning to establish himself on the Paris literary scene. *La Nausée* had been well received, as had *Le Mur*, and he was contributing book reviews on a regular basis to the *NRF*, including a highly critical one on François Mauriac, which provoked an outcry.<sup>3</sup> However, in September 1939 Sartre's life, like that of millions of other French people, was thrown into disarray by the declaration of war.

Sartre was one of the five million Frenchmen mobilised in the first ten days of September. Suddenly, the anti-conformist, anti-authoritarian, passionately independent budding writer was thrust into the world of rules, regulations and uniforms. To begin with he had a pretty easy time of it. Throughout the "Phoney War" (from September 1939 to May 1940) he was assigned to a meteorological unit operating in the east of France where his duties were far from onerous, leaving plenty of time for reading, thinking and writing. He continued with his novel *L'Âge de raison* (*The Age of Reason*) that he had begun in the autumn of 1938. He kept notebooks, published posthumously as *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* (*War Diaries*), in which he recorded his thoughts about his daily life and his life hitherto, as well as his thoughts about ethics and the philosophy of existence, which were informed by his reading of Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Hegel. He also wrote daily to his mother as well as to Beauvoir and other friends. In all, it is estimated that he wrote over a million words during this period.

This somewhat tranquil and largely uneventful existence was shattered by the German offensive of May 1940. On 23 May, Paul Nizan was killed near Dunkirk. Almost a month later, on his thirty-fifth birthday (21 June), Sartre was captured and incarcerated in a POW camp near Trier where, despite his uncompromising atheism, he made friends with a number of priests. He later stated that he had found in the camp a "form of collective existence" that he had not known since his time at the ENS, and that on the whole he was happy there. At Christmas 1940, Sartre wrote, directed and performed in an allegorical "nativity" play, *Bariona*, which he hoped would act as an antidote to the pervasive spirit of defeatism and resignation. In mid-March 1941, he managed to wangle his release from the camp and made his way back to Paris, where he expressed his intention to form a resistance group. This he duly did by gathering together a number of friends, including Simone de Beauvoir, and joining forces with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's embryonic resistance group, *Sous la botte* (*Under the Jackboot*), to create *Socialisme et Liberté* (*Socialism and Freedom*).

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<sup>3</sup> Sartre, "M. François Mauriac et la liberté".

In the summer of 1941, Sartre and Beauvoir cycled to the south of France where they attempted unsuccessfully to persuade André Gide, André Malraux and Daniel Mayer (who had replaced Léon Blum as leader of the SFIO) to join their resistance group. In the autumn, Sartre took up a teaching post at the Lycée Condorcet in Paris, and at the same time he and Merleau-Ponty decided to dissolve *Socialisme et Liberté*. They had failed to break out of their isolation and the risks were out of all proportion to the effectiveness of the group which was, to say the least, very limited.

With the end of *Socialisme et Liberté*, Sartre returned to writing with a vengeance. He began *Le Sursis* (*The Reprieve*), the sequel to *L'Âge de raison*, and at the same time was writing a dense treatise that fleshed out many of the philosophical ideas he had developed during the Phoney War. It was finally published in April 1943 under the title *L'Être et le néant* (*Being and Nothingness*), but made very little impact at the time. Early in 1943, Sartre accepted the invitation from Jean Paulhan, former editor of the *NRF*, to join the *Comité national des écrivains* (National Writers' Committee, or CNE), a PCF-sponsored, broad-front writers' resistance organisation. He had already contributed articles to resistance publications, including a review of Camus's *L'Étranger* (*The Outsider*), and now began writing for the CNE's clandestine publication, *Les Lettres françaises*. In June, Sartre's play, *Les Mouches* (*The Flies*), based on the Greek myth of Orestes and Electra, with Olga Kosakiewicz in the role of the latter, began a short run in Paris. Sartre was convinced that he had fooled the German censors and had succeeded in presenting a resistance play in occupied Paris. While it is true that the play argued for a rejection of passivity and bad faith, and embraced the notion of taking responsibility for one's actions, it remains debatable whether the audiences understood it as a *resistance* play *per se*. The following year saw the staging of what is probably Sartre's most famous play, *Huis clos*, known in English as *In Camera*, or *No Exit*, and containing the celebrated, if misunderstood line: "Hell is other people." The play, in which two women and a man are condemned to live for eternity within the same enclosed space, is a dramatisation of sections of *L'Être et le néant* that explore the difficulty of establishing authentic interpersonal relations. In August 1944, Paris was liberated and an account of these historic days appeared under Sartre's name in the newspaper *Combat*, with which Camus had been closely associated. Summing up his role during the war long after the event, Sartre stated that he was a writer who resisted and not a resistant who wrote.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sartre, *Œuvres romanesques*, lviii.

The war, Sartre later remarked, had divided his life in two. His experiences as a soldier and as a POW had taught him that he was, whether he liked it or not, a social being, and that he could no longer stand apart from society and his historical context. It was this desire to engage with his times that had led him to write *Bariona* and *Les Mouches*, and to try to form a resistance group.

In the wake of the Liberation, Sartre's public persona underwent a dramatic transformation. Whereas before the war he was becoming known in Parisian literary circles as a writer, in the autumn of 1945 he was front-page news, leading him to observe that it was not pleasant to be treated as a public monument in one's own lifetime. September saw the simultaneous publication of his novels, *L'Age de raison* and *Le Sursis*, and the following month the first issue of *Les Temps modernes*, a review launched by Sartre, Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, appeared. Sartre's preface, in which he argued that the writer was inevitably implicated in his times, either by his words or by his silences, provoked uproar in the literary world. These publications underpinned what Beauvoir called "the existentialist offensive" of the autumn of 1945.

In post-Liberation Paris, Sartre's name was inextricably linked to the term "existentialism". Such was the popularity of existentialism, and so widespread was the misunderstanding of what it meant, that in October Sartre felt obliged to give a public lecture to set the record straight.<sup>5</sup> Briefly put, Sartre's atheistic "philosophy of existence" posited that existence preceded essence, that is to say we exist but we are not "fixed". We embark on a continual process of becoming through the choices we make. At the core of this philosophy lies the notion of freedom: we are free and we alone are responsible for the choices we make. To pretend otherwise is to fall into "bad faith".

"Freedom" after the dark years of Nazi occupation caught the spirit of the times, especially when coupled with responsibility. An "existential" perspective allowed people to take responsibility for what they had (or had not) done during the Occupation and also gave them a philosophical and moral basis on which to re-invent themselves. "Existentialism" was also used to refer to a fashionable "anything goes" life-style particularly adopted by middle-class youth, whose habitat was the *caves* (cellars) of St Germain-des-Prés. In this context, the popular press carried lurid stories of Sartre's allegedly sordid, bohemian existence that inevitably dwelt on his "immoral relationship" with Simone de Beauvoir.

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<sup>5</sup> Later published as *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*.

Sartre had hoped to express his political commitment through working closely with the PCF, as he had done at the end of the war in the CNE. However, this was not to be. While he was sympathetic to the Party's aims and recognised that it had the support of the bulk of the working class with whom he sympathised, he rejected its espousal of historical and dialectical materialism and objected to many of its political methods. The Party, for its part, launched unrelenting attacks on Sartre's novels, plays and philosophy, as well as his petit-bourgeois background, and his politics. The main reason for the ferocity of the attacks, which lasted throughout the 1940s, was that the PCF was threatened by the popularity of Sartre's ideas, especially among young people whom the Party was keen to recruit.

In the second half of the 1940s, Sartre continued to provoke scandal and upset amongst both individuals and groups across the political spectrum. In November 1946, he presented as a double-bill *Morts sans sépulture* (usually translated as *Men Without Shadows*),<sup>6</sup> and *La Putain respectueuse* (*The Respectful Prostitute*).<sup>7</sup> The first, set during the Occupation, provoked a walk-out by Raymond Aron and his wife on the opening night because of the violence of scenes depicting the torture of resisters; the second, an attack on racism in the USA, led to charges of anti-Americanism. A year later, Sartre caused uproar again when a radio programme, presented by the team of *Les Temps modernes*, compared de Gaulle with Hitler; and in April 1948 his play, *Les Mains sales* (*Dirty Hands*),<sup>8</sup> inspired in part by the assassination of Leon Trotsky, brought forth yet more bile from the PCF who condemned it as an anti-Communist work. In the same year, the Vatican placed Sartre's works on the infamous *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (Index of forbidden books). By now the Cold War was an undisputed fact of life, and political differences were taking their toll on Sartre's friendships. In 1947, he broke with Aron and a more recent acquaintance, Arthur Koestler, a former Communist now turned rabid anti-communist. Relations with Camus, another former Communist who objected to Sartre's refusal to condemn the USSR, were also somewhat strained.

Sartre had visited the USA immediately after the war and, although there were aspects of the USA that he liked, he was opposed to American foreign policy. At the same time, despite a degree of sympathy for the USSR, he was of the opinion that "the politics of Stalinist communism

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<sup>6</sup> Although the French literally means "dead persons without tombs", or "unburied dead".

<sup>7</sup> Frequently mistranslated as *The Respectable Prostitute*.

<sup>8</sup> Originally mistranslated in the US as *Red Gloves* and in the UK as *Crime passionnel*.

were incompatible with the honest practice of being a professional writer”.<sup>9</sup> Early in 1948, Sartre joined the *Rassemblement démocratique révolutionnaire* (RDR), a newly formed revolutionary socialist movement which rejected both Soviet-style communism and American-style capitalism. The group failed, both in its attempt to form a mass organisation and to maintain a “democratic, revolutionary socialist” middle way. After the organisation lurched to the right, Sartre resigned in October 1949.

In the second half of the decade, Sartre expressed an interest in the Jewish question. In 1946, he had published *Réflexions sur la question juive* (*Reflections on the Jewish Question*), and in February 1948 he appeared as a witness for a former pupil accused of storing arms for the terrorist group Stern, who were fighting the British in Palestine. The following month, Sartre declared his support for the creation of the state of Israel.

At *Les Temps modernes* it was Merleau-Ponty who was *de facto* the political editor. Initially on good terms with the PCF and more sympathetic to Marxism than was Sartre, Merleau-Ponty was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the USSR. In January 1950, an article written by Merleau-Ponty, and signed by him and Sartre, appeared in *Les Temps modernes* denouncing the Soviet camps. That summer, the outbreak of the Korean War was the tipping point for Merleau-Ponty, who viewed the crossing of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel by Soviet-backed North Korean troops as incontrovertible evidence that the USSR was as bellicose and expansionist as the USA. He declared that he would refuse to comment, and urged that *Les Temps modernes* do the same. Sartre, for his part, remained sceptical but unsettled by Merleau-Ponty’s stance. Sartre’s political uncertainty reflected his inability to resolve the contradiction between the intellectual and the man of action, a dilemma articulated by Goetz, the hero of Sartre’s play, *Le Diable et le bon Dieu* (*The Devil and the Good Lord*), which opened in June 1951.

The growing polarisation of the Cold War, Sartre’s sympathy for the working class, who continued to support the PCF, and the Party’s desire to broaden its support among the French intelligentsia were creating the conditions for a rapprochement between Sartre and the Communists. It came in 1952, when Sartre accepted an offer from leading members of the Party to join its campaign to free Henri Martin, a sailor imprisoned for five years for his opposition to French military involvement in Indochina. Sartre secured an interview with Vincent Auriol, the French president, and

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<sup>9</sup> “[L]a politique du communisme stalinien est incompatible avec l’exercice honnête du métier littéraire: [...]” (“Qu’est-ce que la littérature?”, 280, my translation).

undertook to write a book about the affair. In the summer, while he was in Italy, Sartre learned of a massive anti-Communist crackdown in Paris following violent demonstrations against Ridgway, an American general, accused (wrongly) of sanctioning the use of chemical weapons in Korea. Seething with rage and suspecting that the French ruling élite were preparing a *coup d'état*, Sartre returned to Paris where he wrote furiously day and night to produce *Les Communistes et la paix* (*The Communists and Peace*), which marked the beginning of a four-year period as a fellow-traveller. In the summer of 1952, *Les Temps modernes* published Sartre's acerbic response to a letter by Albert Camus, written after *Les Temps modernes* had published a scathing review of Camus's book, *L'Homme révolté* (*The Rebel*). The two men never spoke again.

Between 1952 and 1956, Sartre's literary output was far lower than in previous years. He wrote two plays. *Kean*, based on the life of the English Shakespearean actor, Edmund Kean (and first performed in November 1953), and *Nekrassov*, a biting satire on the bourgeois popular press (first performed in June 1955). He also produced a lengthy biographical essay on the playwright Jean Genet. But most of his energy was being expended supporting the Communist-backed peace movement and encouraging contacts between writers from the East and West. In 1952, he attended the international peace conference in Vienna, an event to which he attached the same importance as the victory of the Popular Front and the Liberation. In 1954, he made the first of a number of visits to the USSR, and in 1955 he and Beauvoir visited China where Sartre met Chairman Mao Zedong. In November 1956, as a result of the Soviet invasion of Hungary and the PCF's enthusiastic endorsement of it, Sartre distanced himself from the French Communists and also resigned from the Franco-Soviet Friendship Society, of which he had been elected Vice-President in 1954.

For Sartre, the next few years were dominated by his engagement with the theory and practice of Marxism and his increasingly radical opposition to French involvement in Algeria. In relation to Marxism, Sartre was attempting to understand what the Soviet intervention in Hungary revealed about the USSR, and concluded that it could only escape its state of ossification by a comprehensive process of de-Stalinisation. Sartre had earlier expressed his sympathy for Tito's Yugoslavia and now supported the beginnings of liberalisation in Poland which he visited in January 1957. He was also starting to explore the compatibility between Marxism and existentialism that resulted in an article "Questions de méthode" ("Search for a Method") which appeared in *Les Temps modernes* in September and October 1957. By now, Sartre, fuelled by amphetamine-



based drugs, was frenetically working on a substantial philosophical treatise in which he attempted to extricate Marxism from the impasse in which it was locked, to develop it and adapt it to contemporary conditions. It was published in 1960 as *Critique de la raison dialectique* (*Critique of Dialectical Reason*).

January 1956, the month in which Sartre made his first speech on events in Algeria, coincided with the appointment of Guy Mollet as Prime Minister. Mollet soon secured “special powers” and doubled the number of French soldiers serving in Algeria. As the independence movement headed by the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) gathered momentum, disturbing accounts of the use of torture by the French army began to circulate. Sartre initially attacked the oppression, super-exploitation and violence to which the colonized peoples of Algeria were subjected and which condemned them to a life of misery and ignorance, but he was soon denouncing the use of torture by the French army as well.

In May 1958, with France threatened by an army coup, de Gaulle returned to power, an event that prompted a resurgence of Sartre’s antipathy to *le Général*, whom he now suspected of intending to establish a dictatorship. The massive endorsement, by referendum, of de Gaulle and a new Constitution in September only served to increase Sartre’s sense of foreboding and his despair with his fellow-citizens, whom he was soon lambasting for their indifference over Algeria where the war continued. In September 1959, he staged a new play, *Les Séquestrés d’Altona* (*The Condemned of Altona*), which explored notions of torture, guilt and national responsibility. Although the play was set in post-Nazi Germany, it clearly resonated with events in Algeria.

In February and March 1960, Sartre and Beauvoir visited Cuba for a month where they met Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, and announced their enthusiastic support for the Cuban revolution. In May, Sartre went to Yugoslavia where Tito received him. Back in France, he was soon expressing his support for conscripts who refused to serve in Algeria, and asserting his solidarity with a clandestine FLN support network headed by a former colleague at *Les Temps modernes*, Francis Jeanson. Not only did Sartre march and continue to protest against French policy in Algeria, but he was also now explicitly supporting the use of unrestrained violence by the FLN against Europeans in Algeria, as his notorious preface to Frantz Fanon’s book, *Les Damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*), clearly illustrated.<sup>10</sup> Sartre’s vigorous opposition to French policy in Algeria had already led to an anti-Sartre backlash when, in October 1960, pro-French

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<sup>10</sup> See Sartre, “Préface”.

Algeria demonstrators took to the streets chanting “Fusillez Sartre!” (“Shoot Sartre!”). In July 1961, Sartre’s Paris flat was bombed by right-wing ultras, and was bombed again the following January.

After the declaration of Algerian independence in June 1962, Sartre again turned his attention towards the USSR, which he visited nine times over the next four years. His official motivation was to resume his role as a builder of bridges between writers in the East and West (which he had relinquished in 1956) and to support “progressive oppositionists” among the Soviet intellectuals. But another reason for his visits was that he had formed an amorous relationship with his guide and interpreter, Léna Zonina. In the early 1960s, Sartre returned to an earlier project, namely revisiting his childhood in order to understand the source of his obsession with writing and being a writer. The resulting account of his life, up to the time of his mother’s remarriage, was published as *Les Mots (Words)* in *Les Temps modernes* in 1963 and in book form, dedicated to “Madame Z” (Léna Zonina), a year later. In the same year, Sartre was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, which he declined as he thought this distinction would turn him into a “literary monument” and limit his freedom to speak out on political issues.

From the mid-1960s, Sartre demonstrated his opposition to American involvement in Vietnam. In 1965, he turned down an invitation to speak at Cornell University and the following July accepted Bertrand Russell’s invitation to join the “tribunal” that Russell was establishing to investigate American war crimes: in May 1967, Sartre became its executive president. The Middle East, with its seemingly intractable question of Arab-Israeli relations, was another area of renewed interest for Sartre at this time. He had been an unconditional supporter of Israel’s right to exist since the end of World War II, but by the mid-1960s he had become more sensitive to the plight of the Palestinians. In 1967 he travelled to Egypt with Beauvoir and their friend (and her lover), Claude Lanzmann, where they were joined by one of Sartre’s former mistresses, Arlette El Kaïm, whom he had legally adopted as his daughter in 1965.

Sartre’s international reputation as a philosopher, as a writer, and as the very personification of “the committed intellectual”, was at its zenith. In France, existentialism was no longer fashionable and Sartre was being eclipsed by a new generation of structuralist and post-structuralist philosophers that included Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Sartre was now perceived as something of an elder statesman on the intellectual stage but—like many elder statesmen—he seemed to have lost much of his relevance and his ability to inspire.

However, when the revolt by students and workers erupted in May 1968, Sartre was quick to reach for his pen and sign petitions to support the students, to castigate the French system of university education, to denounce the repressive actions of the riot police, and to urge unity between workers and students. After the revolt fizzled out in June, Sartre turned on the PCF, whom he accused of objectively siding with de Gaulle and of opposing student-worker unity—in short, of betraying the “May revolution”. In the summer, Sartre also broke definitively with the USSR, following its invasion of Czechoslovakia to crush the “Prague Spring” programme of reform initiated a few months earlier by Alexander Dubcek.

The “events” of May–June 1968 had revealed the existence of a vibrant revolutionary potential within French society, but also led Sartre to reconsider the persona of the committed intellectual that he had epitomised hitherto. He now concluded that it was not enough for the intellectual simply to *support* those in struggle against oppression, the intellectual had to be *an integrated part* of the struggle. This was a far cry from his view of the intellectual that he had outlined in a series of talks in Japan in 1965, when he presented the intellectual as living in a kind of no man’s land viewed with suspicion by the working class, as a traitor by the ruling class, and as a would-be fugitive from his own class which he never quite manages to escape.<sup>11</sup>

Sartre soon had the opportunity to put into practice his notion of what he called the “revolutionary intellectual” or “new intellectual”. In April 1970, leaders of the *Gauche prolétarienne* (Proletarian Left), a Maoist group, asked Sartre to take legal responsibility for the group’s newspaper *La Cause du peuple* (*The People’s Cause*). Although Sartre had his political differences with the Maoists, he approved of their spontaneous approach to revolutionary politics, their refusal to respect “bourgeois” legality, and their willingness to embark on “symbolically violent actions”, as when they openly stole food from an up-market store and distributed it among the down-at-heel inhabitants of the suburbs. He admired the militants who had “de-intellectualised” themselves by abandoning their studies and going to work in factories. Sartre was on very friendly terms with the Maoist leadership, especially Benny Lévy (alias, Pierre Victor), with whom he would discuss politics and philosophy for hours on end. Also, unlike his experience as a Communist fellow traveller when the Party discouraged any contact between workers and intellectuals, Sartre’s involvement with the Maoists led to exchanges with workers, in particular with Renault car workers and with miners from the Pas de Calais.

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<sup>11</sup> See Sartre, “Plaidoyer”, 426.

Despite his age and frail health, Sartre engaged in actions with the Maoists. He sold *La Cause du peuple* on the streets at a time when possession of a single copy could mean a fine or even a prison sentence. He addressed the workers outside the Renault car plant, and on another occasion even tried to hold a meeting inside the factory. He took part in an illegal occupation of the Sacré Coeur basilica to protest at police brutality.

Sartre's Maoist period was the most politically radical of his life. It also coincided with one of his most ambitious literary projects, namely his multi-volume study of the nineteenth-century novelist, Gustave Flaubert. Sartre had read Flaubert as a child, returning to him again during his time at the ENS, and again during the Occupation. In the 1950s, he wrote about 1,000 pages of an existentialist analysis of the author of *Madame Bovary* before abandoning it. In 1971, the first two volumes of *L'Idiot de la famille* (*The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert 1821-1857*) were published, followed by a third in 1972, making a total of over 3,000 pages. Two more volumes were promised, but in June 1973 disaster struck when Sartre lost the use of his "good" eye, rendering him almost blind. He realised that he, who had written for up to ten hours a day for fifty years, would never write again. Undeterred, he began work with Benny Lévy on a political history of the twentieth century for television, but opposition from the political establishment resulted in the project being aborted. Now Sartre turned to collaborative writing with Lévy, who had been his secretary since 1973 and with whom he had formed a close relationship. Some thought Lévy's challenging engagement with Sartre's views had a rejuvenating effect on him. Others, especially Sartre's old friends—and in particular Simone de Beauvoir—who were marginalised by Lévy's forceful presence, considered Lévy to be an interloper, taking advantage of a frail old man and forcing Sartre to accept Lévy's views as his own. Despite his infirmity, Sartre travelled to Germany in December 1974 to visit Andreas Baader, co-founder of the Red Army Fraction, in prison; and in April 1975 he went to Portugal to see what life was like after the overthrow of the fascist régime. In June 1979 there was a rapprochement of sorts with Raymond Aron, when both went to the Palais de l'Elysée, trying to secure assistance for the Vietnamese boat people from the then-President, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing.

Lévy continued to play a prominent role in Sartre's life and, in 1979, organised a meeting of Arab and Israeli intellectuals in Paris, but it was not a success, and Sartre played a minor part. In March 1980, *Le Nouvel Observateur's* intention to publish three dialogues between Lévy and Sartre confirmed the worst fears of Sartre's entourage, for it appeared to them that Lévy had pressured Sartre into denying some of the

philosophical notions he had held most dear. Was it a case of an old man taking the line of least resistance, or of a philosopher doing once again what he had always done, namely to think against himself? In any event, Sartre rejected attempts by Beauvoir and others to prevent publication, and personally telephoned the editor of the weekly magazine to insist that the articles appear. On 20 March, while the dispute was still raging, Sartre was rushed to hospital and died three weeks later, on 15 April.

Despite a large exhibition at the Bibliothèque Nationale in 2005 to mark the centenary of Sartre's birth, the celebration of the man and his works in his native country was more muted than in the rest of the world, where Sartre is still (as it were) alive and well. Sartre's reputation rests on the staggering breadth of his *œuvre* for—as a leading North American Sartre scholar, Ronald Aronson, has observed—it is possible to study Sartre in relation to topics as diverse as Marxism, colonialism, the developing world, violence, racism, art, music, fiction, the theatre and the cinema.<sup>12</sup>

Whereas Sartre remains one of the most studied of all French thinkers or literary figures, his relevance and significance are not restricted to the relatively closed world of academia. Sartre's philosophy of freedom is a practical philosophy, as he himself demonstrated. His willingness to question himself, to think against himself, to explore the tensions between the man he had been, the man he was, and the man he wanted to become, underpins the dynamic nature of his life. His philosophy, both at a personal level and at a broader level, is an optimistic and generous one. From 1945 until his death, he marched (until he was too frail), wrote, proclaimed and agitated to oppose all forms of oppression and exploitation, in particular racism, colonialism and imperialism. He was convinced that the world could be a different and better place, although, true to his anti-determinist philosophy, he never assumed that it *necessarily* would be.

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<sup>12</sup> See Aronson, "Meanwhile".

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