

Sartre was not a Marxist

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Abstract: Ronald Aronson praises Jean-Paul Sartre’s existential Marxism in an essay in the *Boston Review*. I argue that existential Marxism is a case of a *contradictio in adiecto*. Sartre was never recognized as a Marxist by his contemporaries. He not only failed to show any interest in the question of economic exploitation, but most of the answers he gave in the *Critique* even contradicted Marxist theory. His expression of Marxism as the philosophy of our time seems to have rather been more an act of courtesy than the expression of deep conviction. As Sartre himself later said, Marxism and existentialism are quite separate philosophies.

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Marxism has seen a revival in recent years with preeminent works such as Slavoj Žižek’s *The Relevance of the Communist Manifesto* (2019), Terry Eagleton’s *Why Marx Was Right* (2011), and Alain Badiou’s *The Communist Hypothesis* (2009/2010). In fall 2018, Ron Aronson published a remarkable essay with the title: “The Philosophy of Our Time,”¹ in which he praises Jean-Paul Sartre’s existential Marxism as a possible “philosophical foundation for today’s revitalized critiques of capitalism.” Aronson writes about Sartre’s turn from his early individualism with his emphasis on absurdity, freedom, and responsibility to Marxism—of course, not a Stalinist version of Marxism, but a rather special version—existential Marxism. My thesis in this essay is that terms such as existential or existentialist Marxism or Marxist existentialism are cases of a *contradictio in adiecto*.

In its March 1966 issue, the French Communist journal *La Nouvelle Critique* asked the question: *Sartre est-il marxiste?* Is Sartre a Marxist?² At that time, *La Nouvelle Critique*—originally founded by Sartre’s pupil Jean Kanapa in 1948 and kept on an orthodox, i.e.,

Stalinist path until 1958—had taken a theoretical turn as it sought out new prospects for Marxism. The journal's answer to the question was a clear "No." Sartre was deemed an antiquated humanist, operating with Hegelian rather than Marxist concepts,³ a philosopher closer to Wilhelm Dilthey and Max Weber than Karl Marx.⁴ In 1962, Adam Schaff, Poland's leading Marxist philosopher of the early 1960s and far from an orthodox dogmatist, published a book entitled: *A Philosophy of Man, Marxism and Existentialism*. Though a proponent of socialist humanism who readily conceded that existentialism had raised pertinent questions, Schaff insisted that there could be no marriage between existentialism and Marxism, such as the one proposed by Sartre in his *Search for a Method*. According to Schaff, reconciling Marxist materialism and Sartrean idealism was as impossible as combining fire and water.⁵ Danilo Pejović, a Croatian philosopher, a nonorthodox Marxist, and one of the founders of the journal *Praxis*, penned a positive review of Sartre in its first international issue in 1965. Although he did not discount the possibility that Sartre's thought might develop along the lines of the young György Lukács, Ernst Bloch, Theodor W. Adorno, or Herbert Marcuse, he described Sartre's existentialism as a typically French variation of radical nihilism.⁶ And it was not only philosophers with origins in orthodox Marxism who rejected the marriage of Marxism and existentialism. As Thomas Flynn noted in *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism*, two other well-known experts in Marxism and existentialism were also clear that "Sartre fails the test for membership in the Marxist family": Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Adventures of the Dialectic* and Raymond Aron in *Marxism and the Existentialists*.⁷

We should also bear in mind that the association of Sartre and Marxism was—and is still—one of the principal disparaging clichés deployed by the many "Sartrophobes" for whom Sartre the Marxist, Sartre the Commie, even Sartre the Maoist was an effective way of short-circuiting any discussion of Sartre's ideas. Alongside these many detractors however, there remain a number of Sartre enthusiasts who persist in reading Sartre as an existentialist Marxist. Ron Aronson is one of the most prominent, but he does not stand alone. Mark Poster with *Existential Marxism in Postwar France* in 1975, John Lawler with *The Existentialist Marxism* in 1976, Thomas Flynn with *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism* in 1984, and more recently, Elizabeth Butterfield with *Sartre and Posthumanist Humanism* in 2012 have all made important contributions to the notion of an existential Marxism.⁸

The most important argument in favor of existentialist Marxism can be found in Sartre himself, in his *Search for a Method*, where he

called Marxism the philosophy of our time—and even the philosophy beyond which we cannot go—while labeling existentialism an “ideology.” However, Sartre himself referred to Marxist theory only rarely in his works after the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960). The *Critique* itself consists mainly of points that contest Marxism, although the points put forward by Sartre are generally responses to questions raised by Marxist theory and practice. In my view, the *Critique* must be considered rather as an anti-Marxist opus than as a great Marxist treatise as Aronson claims.⁹ Whereas in Marxist theory, classes are the prime agents of history, they are reduced to what Sartre calls “series” in the *Critique*. Classes do not act in Sartre’s eyes; at best they form milieus. In this way, Sartre implicitly contests the Marxist idea of a revolution by the proletariat. It is Sartre’s term of the “group-in-fusion” that comes closest to the Marxist understanding of a class-driven revolution. It is this concept, developed in relation to the storming of the Bastille in Paris in 1789 and possibly the first Russian revolution in 1905, that anchors Sartre’s concise theory about the development of groups. They are the real actors in history. Groups first start with voluntary congregations of people, like those playing soccer in a park on a Sunday afternoon. At the next stage of its evolution, the pledged group appears. This group is not yet well organized, but power and authority are already discernable attributes in the pledged group. The early Communist groups, e.g. the First International (1864–1876) and the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) before the February Revolution, were such pledged groups. These groups have however a congenital defect: what Sartre called “terror-fraternity.” The splits between Marxists and anarchists in the First International and between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks in the RSDLP were the forerunners of Stalin’s terror régime from the 1930s to his death in 1953. For Sartre, the prerequisite of a successful revolution is the existence of a pledged or organized group. Sartre’s insistence, in his discussion in 1953 with Claude Lefort, Merleau-Ponty’s friend and former pupil, that a successful revolution can only be made by a party, i.e. a pledged or organized group, and not by a class as such, is a strong critique of the Marxist concept of revolution: it is never the proletariat class that creates a revolution, but always a group. After the discussion with Lefort, Merleau-Ponty called Sartre an “Ultra-Bolshevik” in *Adventures of the Dialectic*—and he was not wrong. In short, one might say that Sartre even goes a step further than Vladimir Lenin, the most important Bolshevik theoretician, by leaving out the fig leaf of the proletariat in whose name the Communist party claimed its revolution.

The next steps that follow the pledged group in its development are the organized and then the institutionalized group. The group gives itself an organizational structure which then finally turns into institutions, a development that describes very well the organizational changes within the Soviet Communist Party between the February Revolution in 1917 and the Moscow Trials 1936–1938. The end result sees the group transformed back into a congealed, (re-) serialized subject. Sartre's theory of the group can indeed be seen as a new version of "Man is a useless passion," where failure characterizes man's best endeavors. Marxist optimism, where the revolution of the proletariat finally leads to the workers' paradise, is not compatible with Sartre's realistic and disenchanting theory of the group. Understanding the background against which Sartre wrote his *Critique*, we are forced to recognize that this great treatise is fundamentally anti-Marxist. In all its major conclusions, it is quite opposed to Marxist theory. That the *Critique* indeed was designed as a discussion with Marxism is confirmed by its second volume in which Sartre aims to demonstrate why the development of Marxism in the Soviet Union finally culminated in Stalinism. Once he had solved that conundrum—his explanation was that this development was abetted by the situation—, Sartre lost his interest in Volume 2. He did not apply his conceptual apparatus to an analysis of the capitalist system and volume 2 of the *Critique* remained unfinished.

To argue for the proximity of Sartre's existentialism and Marxism, Aronson refers to Sartre's long-standing interest in Marxism: "Both politically and philosophically Sartre became preoccupied with Marxism, and he remained so for three-quarters of his productive life." Indeed, Marxism was a big challenge to his thoughts between 1945 and 1973. He dealt with Marxism in works such as *Materialism and Revolution* in 1947, *Search for a Method* in 1957, and *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in 1960. In his literary and theatrical opus, Communists play a prominent role in *In the Mesh* (1946/1948) and *Dirty Hands* (1948).¹⁰ Politically, Sartre frequently entered into short-term alliances with Communists and other left-wing movements: the French Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire (RDR) (1948–1949), the French Communists (1952–1956), the Soviet Communists (1954–1956, 1962–1968), the Algerian Liberation Front (1955–1962), Castro's Cuba (1960–1971), and the "Maoist" movements in France such as the Gauche Prolétarienne (1970–1973) and Vive la Révolution (1970–1971).¹¹ But to get a more precise view of Sartre's relationship with Marxism, the picture presented by Aronson however requires some adjustments. At the

ENS (École Normale Supérieure), Sartre was known as a pupil of Alain, a prominent left-liberal philosopher. Although Paul Nizan and Aron became members of the Communist and the Socialist Parties respectively, Sartre kept his distance from politics. Faced with the activities of the Popular Front and its intellectual front organizations, Sartre remained a bystander. Later, Sartre would call this period before World War II his early anarchist time.¹²

Sartre came into closer contact with the Communists in the Resistance during World War II. However, his relationship with them was always strained. And truth be told, Sartre's knowledge of Marxist theory was really quite limited. Discussing the relationship between Marxism and existentialism in *Materialism and Revolution* in 1946, he only quoted Joseph Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* of 1938. In the book *Entretiens sur la politique* (*Conversations about Politics*) issued in 1948/1949 together with David Rousset and Gérard Rosenthal, with whom he had founded the RDR, Sartre fared badly, particularly when they discussed economic issues. It is not surprising that the book never saw a reprint.

Later, Sartre began reading Marx and Engels in greater depth. In his *Faux savants ou faux livres* which Sartre wrote as an introduction to Louis Dalmas's book about Yugoslav Communism (published in 1950), Sartre showed a fair knowledge of Marxist theory. He cited not only several important works by Marx—*Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, *The Holy Family*, *The German Ideology*, and *Value, Price and Profit*—but also writings by Rosa Luxemburg. He would never reach this level again, neither in *The Communists and Peace* nor in *Search for a Method*, the *Critique*, and the two discussions with Italian Communists at the Gramsci Institute in Rome in 1961 and 1964.

An analysis of Sartre's quotations from works by Marx and Engels shows that Sartre knew Engels's *Anti-Dühring* particularly well, which is quite astonishing given that Sartre had a very low opinion of Engels.¹³ His general knowledge of Marx and Engels seems to be relatively superficial, much of it coming from secondary sources such as Maximilien Rubel's *Karl Marx, essai de biographie intellectuelle* (1957). There are certain quotations which Sartre frequently mentions: men making their history themselves in given circumstances, the materialist outlook on nature "without alien addition", and the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, according to which philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways, whereas the point is to change it. But even in the case of his most frequent quotations, Sartre's theoretical knowledge seems limited. When writing

about men making their history in given circumstances in *Search for a Method*, he referred to Engels's letter to Borgius, unaware that this was just a reformulation of a sentence Marx had already written in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. When Sartre ventured into the field of economic theory in *The Communists and Peace* part III in 1954, he referred not to Marx's own economic theory, but to neo-Malthusian theory. (He retracted this part of the article when he reprinted it in 1964.¹⁴) Generally, Sartre's quotations of Marx and Engels leave a rather cursory impression, particularly when we consider that the collected oeuvre of Marx and Engels reaches forty-four volumes. Sartre hardly ever refers to the many discussions among Marxist thinkers like Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Gramsci, Lukács, Anton Pannekoek, Max Adler. Even the French Marxists: Paul Lafargue and Jean Jaurès and his own contemporaries, Marcuse, Bloch, Adorno, and Louis Althusser—just to mention some of the most important theoreticians—are rarely mentioned. If Sartre was ever a Marxist, he was a Marxist intellectual with only the most rudimentary knowledge of Marx and Engels and their successors.

It also needs to be pointed out that whenever there was a discussion with Marxists in the 1960s and 1970s, Sartre stood in opposition to them. In a debate moderated by Jean Orcel on the question of a dialectics of nature, Sartre sided with Jean Hippolyte against his Communist friends Roger Garaudy and Jean-Pierre Vigier.¹⁵ Even with his Italian friends, the unorthodox Communists of *Il Manifesto*, with whom he discussed the relationship of classes and the party in 1969, the gap could not be closed. In the discussions with Benny Lévy, alias Pierre Victor, as the representative of Marxist orthodoxy, Sartre insisted, with Philippe Gavi's support, that the question of women and gays could not be subsumed under the question of proletariat vs. capitalists as postulated by Marxist theory.¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty correctly remarked that Sartre, who never showed any significant interest in questions of economy and distributive justice, was more interested in oppression than in exploitation.¹⁷

Sartre's political core values can be defined by four primary refusals: no to militarism, no to colonialism, no to discrimination (against women, Jews, blacks, gays), and no to bourgeois morality with its values regarding authority and honor, family and money. Most of these values date back to his time at the ENS. Sartre refused to participate in military training and signed a petition led by Alain against the militarization of society and politics in 1927. His anti-colonialism dates even further back to 1924 when the Rif War in Northern Morocco politicized the young Sartre. At the ENS, Sartre

opposed bourgeois decency whenever he could. Only his opposition to discrimination cannot be clearly located on the timeline. His relationship with Beauvoir indicates that he already regarded women as equal when he studied at the ENS. At this time, he also had a gay friend, Marc Zuorro. On the other hand, his stance against racism may date only from the thirties, when he made friends among Eastern Europeans, including Jews.

Sartre forged tactical political alliances with the Communists because their ideology was the only politically relevant one with whom he could share, if only in part, his core values. The Communist parties proclaimed their opposition to war, colonialism, racism, and bourgeois morality—although that opposition rarely entailed more than lip service. Sartre was quite aware of their treatment of their satellite states and the Jews. He accused the Communists of following the conservative morality of Vichy France as defined by the anti-republican *travail-famille-patrie* (labor–family–fatherland).¹⁸ As Jean Cau, his former secretary and later political opponent, said, Sartre always remained very lucid with regard to Communist regimes in his privately made remarks. To call Sartre a fellow traveler, as Aronson does, is misleading. It was rather a case of limited collaboration for certain purposes. It is remarkable how quickly Sartre terminated his cooperation with them. As soon as the Communists violated Sartre's core values, he broke with them. Prominent progressive writers such as Arthur Miller and Heinrich Böll, who were never considered as fellow travelers, visited the Soviet Union long after Sartre had stopped traveling East.

Sartre's core values were originally not Marxist values, but those in support of the radicals.¹⁹ What distinguished Sartre from his grandfather and his stepfather, who were both supporters of the Radical Party, was that Sartre radicalized their ideas. In so doing, Sartre fit very well into a scheme Alain described in 1909: "The [political] opinion stayed always the same. It was called progressist when the opportunists backed down on their promises, radical when the progressists backed down, radical-socialist when the radicals backed down. I see a time coming when all the world will be socialist."²⁰ With regard to Sartre, this progression should really end "... anarchist when the socialists backed down."

In his final years, Sartre returned more and more to the early anarchism of the years before World War II. In the discussions of *It is Right to Rebel*, Sartre referred, for the first time, to his being a member of the antihierarchical-libertarian movement.²¹ A similar statement was published in *Actuel* and other journals in early 1973.²² However,

when the German journal *Der Spiegel* asked him whether he was an anarchist, he denied it,²³ although Sartre was certainly aware that libertarian—in French *libertaire*—was a codeword for anarchist since the “nefarious laws” of 1893/1894. It took him two more years to concede that libertarian indeed was an anarchist term²⁴ and another three to four years until he publicly claimed to be an anarchist, as he did in the interviews with Juan Goytisolo in 1978 and with Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, Mario Casañas, and Alfredo Gómez-Muller in 1979.²⁵ Unfortunately, the first interview was published only in Spanish, the second one as *Anarchie et morale* only in 1982. Sartre’s main political idea was that freedom and power, particularly state power, are not compatible, an idea expressed by the title of an interview he gave to the Italian left-wing publication *Lotta Continua* on 9 September 1977: *libertà e potere non vanno in coppia*. For Sartre, the only way to fully live in freedom was for human beings with similar fundamental projects to band together. However, Sartre, the eternal realist, did not believe in any quick waning of the state and state power. This first political philosophy that Sartre ever developed was emphatically not a Marxist, but an anarchist one. Nothing proves this better than the fact that state power worried him more than its economic counterpart. The term ‘existentialist Marxism’ would definitely not have found favor with Sartre in the years before his death.

Sartre’s statement in *Search for a Method* raises the question of what Sartre meant by calling Marxism the philosophy of our time. If it was meant as an honest statement, it could hardly have referred to more than the fact that he found in Marxism a permanent challenge.²⁶ Another possible and more probable explanation is that this statement was just a *captatio benevolentiae*. It should not be forgotten that Sartre published *Search for a Method* first in the Polish Communist journal *Twórczość*, which invited Sartre to write about the relationship between Marxism and existentialism. Sartre frequently adjusted his texts to the expectations of his interviewers and readers. Sartre’s violent language in his preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* mirrors Fanon’s own language. The very different interviews he gave to the more political John Gerassi in comparison to those with the less political Michel Contat are additional examples of Sartre adjusting his language to the expectations of his conversational partners. Furthermore, let us remember Sartre’s contradictory answers to the question of whether there was ever a fundamental break or turning point in his thinking. Whereas he denied any break in his discussions with philosophers, that was not the answer he gave to his political partners.²⁷

There remains, finally, the question: could Marxism and Sartrean existentialism be complementary, natural partners for a new leftist political movement? This seems to be the conclusion David Schweickart wants to reach in his essay *Sartre, Camus and a Marxism for the 21st Century*.²⁸ Schweickart recognizes, in Sartre's commitment to action, an echo to Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach about the importance that philosophers change the world.²⁹ According to Schweickart, a living Marxism requires the supplement of an existentialist ethics.³⁰ However, when we look at the components of Schweickart's Marxist program: anti-colonialism, anti-racism, feminism, anti-war activism, gay rights, and ecology, they seem closer to what Marx called utopian socialism than to Marx's own program of scientific socialism.

When debating the relationship between Marxism and Sartrean existentialism, it is crucial to recognize that Marxism is not just a list of political demands, but a theory first, a theory that had its roots in Hegel's philosophy. As Engels described it,³¹ Marxism turned Hegel's dialectic off its head and placed it upon its feet. The spirit, the *Geist*, was replaced by the economy and Napoleon, as the world-soul, by the proletariat. However, the major traits of Hegelian philosophy were maintained by Marxism. Hegel's determinism, his optimism, his neglect of the individual remained unaltered. When Sartre approvingly quotes Marx affirming that men make their own history, it is not immediately apparent that each thinker sees "men" quite differently. Whereas with Marx, men were rather collectives in the form of classes, in Sartre's theory, they were individual subjects banding together in groups. Sartre's existentialism derives from a philosophy in opposition to Hegel and Marx. As the interview with the Australian Max Charlesworth shows, Sartre was quite aware of the fact that the sources of Marxism and existentialism "are of course quite different."³² Kierkegaard understood himself as a thinker in opposition to Hegel. As to the question of whether existence precedes essence or essence precedes existence, Hegel and Marx believe in the latter, whereas Sartre's whole philosophy is predicated on the thesis that existence precedes essence. Sartre's understanding of ontological freedom is incompatible with the understanding shared by both Hegel and Marx that freedom is insight into necessity.³³ Sartre's attitude with regard to ontological freedom did not fundamentally change between *Being and Nothingness* and the *Critique*. In both works, we can find the "scandalous" sentence that the slave, too, is free.³⁴

In Sartre's philosophy of freedom, there is no room for the Marxist differentiation between base and superstructure either. Sartre

insisted against Marxist theory that ethics, in particular, belong to the base and not the superstructure.³⁵ Sartre's fundamental dichotomy was not between the economic base and the socio-politico-cultural superstructure, but between praxis and the practico-inert together with its institutions. Although Sartre most probably adopted the notion of *praxis* from Marx via Lukács, his understanding of *praxis* is closer to Husserl's lifeworld as used also by the phenomenological sociologist Alfred Schütz and by Jürgen Habermas. *Praxis* for Sartre is anchored not only in labor, as the Marxists understood it, but also in desire (*Notebooks for an Ethics*) and needs (the *Critique*).

An important source of Sartrean existentialism is Wilhelm Dilthey, one of Hegel's successors in Berlin. Sartre's differentiation between explaining (*expliquer*) and understanding (*comprendre*), to which he adds apprehending (*intelliger*) in the *Critique*, goes—via Karl Jaspers—back to Dilthey. This distinction is fundamentally directed against the Marxist deterministic understanding that the world is governed by cause-effect relationships. For Sartre, the human world cannot be explained in a deterministic way: Paul Valéry is a petit-bourgeois intellectual, but not every petit-bourgeois intellectual is Valéry.³⁶ Not astonishingly, Sartre could not accept the Marxist assumption of a dialectics of nature. Nature and human beings follow different rules. Sartre's most important contribution in *Search for a Method* was his regressive-progressive method. Marxist historical materialism—as well as Freud's psychoanalysis or Western sociology—may contribute a lot to the regressive part, to the explanation of what is. However, for comprehending human beings and their acts, understanding is needed. In this regard, existentialism surpasses Marxism and Sartre tried to prove it with his *Family Idiot*.

Finally, where there is no determinism, there cannot be any optimism (or pessimism). Marxism is based on optimism, on the expectation that the socialist revolution will arrive soon and that thereafter the realm of necessity will be replaced by the realm of freedom. Sartre did not exclude this eventuality. However, he was skeptical that its arrival was in any way imminent. Adopting the notion of scarcity from bourgeois neoclassical economics, Sartre expressed serious doubts about the inevitability of this happy outcome. Unsurprisingly, this notion played an important role in Marxist critiques of Sartre's *Critique*. Sartre could appreciate Marx, as the most prominent left-Hegelian philosopher and a sharp-witted observer of contemporary and historical events. But he had his doubts about Marx, the last classical economist and the leader of a political movement. In hindsight, Sartre was right. As an economist, Marx failed. He perfected the

labor theory of value by applying it to the labor market. However, his economic theory was overdetermined which is why he could not reconcile his labor theory of value with his theory of “prices of production”. Additionally, as the leader of a political movement, he showed not only traits that Sartre identified with terror-fraternities, but he also let his political expectations overinfluence his theories.³⁷

With regard to the relationship between existence and essence, to determinism, and optimism, the differences between Marxism and existentialism exclude any possibility of a reciprocal integration of the two. Their relation could be at best one of subordination. In *Search for a Method*, Sartre seems to accept the subordination of existentialism as an ideology subservient to Marxist philosophy. However, the careful reader, encountering Sartre’s articulation of the regressive–progressive method, soon grasps that Sartre, deep down, feels his existentialist method to be superior to the Marxist one. Sartre followed his path, not only in the *Critique*, but also in his later works where he hardly ever mentions Marxist theory. Schaff was right when he called the combination of Marxist materialism and Sartrean existentialism as impossible as combining fire and water.

The only way to save Aronson’s approach (Schweikart’s too) is to redefine Marxism. One is, after all, free to establish one’s own kind of Latter-Day Saints Marxism. Such a Latter-Day Saints Marxism could be reduced to a very selective reading of Marx, e.g. his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844, combined with a similarly selective reading of Sartre, e.g. his *Notebooks for an Ethics*. One must only be aware of the price to be paid. There were reasons with the authors why these two works were not published during their lifetime.. Marx had given up on philosophy which he considered a futile exercise by 1846³⁸. And by 1949, Sartre had dismissed his approach to create a universalist, almost Kantian normative ethics, which might have built a link to Marxist theory. When Sartre, a dyed-in-the-wool nominalist, talked about Marxism later, he always had in mind the major Marxists of his time, i.e. Soviet-style Marxists—to the displeasure of the socialists and Trotskyites of his time. As Sartre said in his interview with Contat, Marxism showed its true face in the Soviet Union.³⁹

Let Sartre have the final word:

R.[ybalka]: You have defined the Critique de la raison dialectique as a work opposed to the Communists and yet endeavoring to be Marxist.

Sartre: Opposed to the Communists, certainly. But Marxist is a word that I used a bit lightly then. At that time, I considered the Critique to be Marxist: I was convinced of it. But I have changed my mind since then. Today, I

think that, in certain areas, the Critique is close to Marxism, but it is not a Marxist work. [...]

P.[ucciani]: I myself was bothered by your distinction. I saw the existentialism of the Critique as an attempt at synthesizing Marxism and going beyond it, whereas you said that existentialism was only an enclave of Marxism.

Sartre: Yes, but that was my mistake. It cannot be an enclave, because of my idea of freedom, and therefore, it is ultimately a separate philosophy. I do not at all think that ultimately this philosophy is Marxist. It cannot ignore Marxism; it is linked to it, just as some philosophies are linked to others without, however, being contained by them. But now I do not consider it at all a Marxist philosophy.⁴⁰

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Notes

1. Ron Aronson, "The Philosophy of Our Time," *Boston Review* (November 14, 2018), <http://bostonreview.net/philosophy-religion/ronald-aronson-philosophy-our-time>, accessed May 5, 2019.
2. André Gisselbrecht, Jean Roy, Jeanette Colombel, François Hincker, & Christine Glucksmann, "Sartre est-il marxiste?" *La Nouvelle Critique. Revue du marxisme militant*, 173–174 March 1966, 91–198.
3. With Sartre, the relationship between lord and bondsman is more important than the dichotomy between bourgeoisie and proletariat. Unlike the Marxist concept of the one-way exploitation of the worker by the capitalist, the relationship between lord and bondsman is a mutual one. The lord, whether a colonialist, a manager, or a male human being, is not only an oppressor, but also an oppressed one (see *The Wretched of the Earth* in its corrected translation of 2004 (Sartre, "Preface" in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press 2004), xliii–lxii, here lv); already in *What is Literature?* 1948, Sartre had written that the bourgeois is tyrant and victim at the same time (in "Qu'est-ce que la littérature?" in id., *Situations III*, nouv. éd. (Paris: Gallimard, 2013), 213).
4. André Gisselbrecht, "Introduction," *La Nouvelle Critique*, 92–99, here 96.
5. Adam Schaff, *Marx oder Sartre?* (VEB Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften: Berlin 1965), 47.
6. Danilo Pejovi, "Jean-Paul Sartre," *Praxis: Revue philosophique*, 1, 1 (Zagreb, 1965), 71–86, here 85.
7. Thomas Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1984), 176.
8. Mark Poster: *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). James Lawler: *The Existentialist*

- Marxism of Jean-Paul Sartre* (Amsterdam: B. R. Grüner, 1976). Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism*. Elizabeth Butterfield, *Sartre and Posthumanist Humanism* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012).
9. Aronson lists *The Family Idiot* as Sartre's other great Marxist treatise Sartre. This is astonishing. There are virtually no references to Marx and Marxism in this oeuvre. At its origin there was a dispute between the Marxist Roger Garaudy and Sartre as to whether Marxism or existentialism is better suited to analyze an individual.
 10. To interpret *Dirty Hands* as a play about Communist politics is wrong, however. *In the Mesh* and *Dirty Hands* are part of a long-standing indirect dialogue about the ethical relationship between ends and means between Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, on the one hand, and Albert Camus on the other hand, that ended with their break in 1952. Whereas Sartre and Beauvoir defended an ethics where ends and means form a unity, in Max Weber's terms an ethics of responsibility—in *Moral Idealism and Political Realism* and *The Useless Months* in 1945, *The Responsibility of the Writer* and *What is Literature?* 1947, *Notebooks for an Ethics* 1947/1948, *In the Mesh* 1946/1948, *Dirty Hands* 1948, *The Devil and the Good Lord* 1951—Camus advocated an ethics of conviction—in *Letters to a German Friend* 1943–1945, *Neither Victims nor Executioners* 1946, *The Just Assassins* 1949, *The Rebel* 1951.
 11. These liaisons frequently ended earlier than Sartre's official announcements suggested. The collaboration with the Soviet Union factually ended in 1965, after an anti-Semitic incident in the Ukraine and Vladimir Brodsky's conviction. The break with Castro came at the latest in 1965 when homosexuals were confined to reeducation camps. See in that regard Heberto Padilla's statement in Néstor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez-Leal's film *Conducta impropia* according to which Sartre had said that what the Jews were in the Third Reich, the gays were in Cuba (Néstor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez-Leal, *Conducta impropia* (Editorial Playor: Madrid 1984), 79). The split with the Gauche Prolétarienne came as early as February 1971, just ten months after the start of their collaboration, when Sartre left "Secours Rouge", an organization he had co-founded.
 12. In his obituary for Merleau-Ponty, Sartre characterized himself as having been an anarchist before he met Merleau-Ponty (Jean-Paul Sartre, "Merleau-Ponty" in *Les Mots et autres écrits biographiques* (Paris: Gallimard 2010), 1070). Similarly, in the interview with Contat (id., "Autoportrait à soixante-dix ans" in id., *Situations X* (Paris: Gallimard 1976), 155) and in the interview with Michel Rybalka, Oreste Pucciani, and Susan Gruenheck in May 1975 (Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Rybalka, Oreste Pucciani, and Susan Gruenheck, "The Interview" in Paul Arthur Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (La Salle: Open Court 1982), 21).
 13. In *Materialism and Revolution*, he described the meeting between Marx and Engels in 1844 as fatal for Marx's philosophical development ("Matérialisme et révolution" in id., *Situations II*, nouv. éd., (Paris: Gallimard 2012), 315–382, here 373).
 14. Id., "Les Communistes et la paix III" in id., *Situations V*, nouv. éd., (Paris: Gallimard 2012), 385–493, here 493.
 15. Published as *Marxisme et existentialisme. Controverse sur la dialectique* in 1961.
 16. Philippe Gavi, Jean-Paul Sartre & Pierre Victor, *On a raison de se révolter* (Gallimard: Paris 1974), 113–116.

17. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Die Abenteuer der Dialektik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1974), 187.
18. Jean-Paul Sartre, “Qu’est-ce que la littérature?” in Sartre, *Situations III*, nouv. ed. (Paris: Gallimard 2013), 9–267, here 223.
19. Their party was the Parti républicain, radical et radical-socialiste, founded in 1901 and dissolved in 1972. Sartre referred to them mostly as the Radical Party.
20. Alain (Émile Chartier), “Les mots et les choses“, 3 avril 1909, http://etienne.chouard.free.fr/Europe/Ressources_UPCPA/Alain-Elements_d_une_doctrine_radicale.doc, accessed May 11, 2019, 139–140. Translation by the author. Opportunists, progressists, radical, and radical-socialists were factions within the French liberal spectrum with the opportunists as the most conservative one.
21. Gavi, Sartre and Victor, *On a raison de se révolter*, 77–78.
22. Jean-Paul Sartre, “entretien avec Sartre,“ *Tout Va Bien*, 4, Feb. 20–March 20, 1973, 30–35, here 31–32.
23. Id., “Volksfront nicht besser als Gaullisten,“ *Der Spiegel*, 12.2.1973, 84–98, here 92.
24. Id., “Autoportrait à soixante-dix ans“ in id., *Situations X* (Paris: Gallimard 1976), 133–226, here 155.
25. Juan Goytisolo and Jean-Paul Sartre, “Conversación con Jean-Paul Sartre,“ *El País, Arte y pensamiento*, June 11, 1978, I–VII, here VII. Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, *Philosophie der Befreiung* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1983), 365.
26. Existentialist philosophy comprises ontology, epistemology, psychology, social and political philosophy, and ethics/meta-ethics. The only other major modern philosophy after Hegel asserting a similarly broad claim as a totalizing philosophical system was Marxism. Therefore, Marxism was not only politically, but also philosophically a challenge for Sartre. For the understanding of existentialism as a systemic philosophy, see Simone de Beauvoir’s answer in an interview with Margaret A. Simons: “A philosopher is someone like Spinoza, Hegel, or like Sartre: someone who builds a great system” (in Margaret A. Simons, Beauvoir and The Second Sex, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 1999), 11).
27. The interviews for *Library of Living Philosophers* and with Leo Fretz vs. *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre, Sartre by himself*, and *It is Right to Rebel*.
28. David Schweickart, “Sartre, Camus and a Marxism for the 21st Century,“ in *Sartre Studies International*, 24, 2, 2018, 1–24.
29. *Ibid.*, 21.
30. *Ibid.*, 9.
31. Friedrich Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie“, in *Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels – Werke*, 21 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, Berlin 1962), 259–307, here 293.
32. Max Charlesworth, *The Existentialists and Jean-Paul Sartre* (St. Lucia: Univ. of Queensland Press 1975), 106.
33. Friedrich Engels, “Herrn Eugen Dühring’s Umwälzung der Wissenschaft“ in *Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels – Werke*, 20, (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, Berlin 1962), 1–303, here 106
34. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’Être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard 2012), 594; Id., *Critique de la raison dialectique*, t. I (Paris: Gallimard 1985), 666.
35. E.g. *Ibid.*, 357–358.
36. *Ibid.*, 53.

37. The historical play between thesis, antithesis, and synthesis is expected to suddenly stop with the victory of the proletariat as the antithesis of the stage of capitalism. This mistake became obvious after the “socialist” revolutions in Eastern Europe and East Asia. The proletariat did not become the dominant force, but a new thesis was formed: the party and state bureaucracy. Equally astonishing is Marx’s assumption that capitalism would exist only for a few decades whereas the previous modes of production always existed for several centuries. The fact that capitalism is still growing and conquering new areas proves how wrong Marx and Engels were with their expectations of an early end to capitalism. “Socialist” revolutions never succeeded in advanced capitalist economies.
38. Both Marx and Sartre shared a certain contempt for traditional philosophy in the sense of ontology and epistemology. In *The German Ideology*, written already around 1846, Marx and Engels compared philosophy to masturbation, whereas the study of the real world was likened to real sex (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Die deutsche Ideologie” in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels-Werke*, 3 (Berlin: Dietz 1969), 5 – 530, here 218). In the main, *Being and Nothingness* was not the book on phenomenological ontology it claimed to be, but rather a work on existential psychoanalysis. The *Critique* was an oeuvre about anthropology or sociology, very far away from classical philosophy. Whereas Sartre saved his affiliation with philosophy by extending the notion of philosophy to most of psychology, sociology, and history, Marx destroyed it.
39. Sartre, “Autoportrait,” 193.
40. Sartre and Rybalka, “The Interview,” 20.