

# Revisiting Existential Marxism

## A Reply to Alfred Betschart

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Alfred Betschart has claimed that the project of existential Marxism is a contradiction in terms, but this argument, even when supported by many experts and quotes from Sartre's 1975 interview, misses the point of my *Boston Review* article, "The Philosophy of Our Time."<sup>1</sup> I believe the important argument today is not about whether we can prove that Sartre ever became a full-fledged Marxist, but rather about the political and philosophical possibility, and importance today, of existentialist Marxism.

I have come to this over a lifetime of study and political involvement. Alfred saved me from embarrassment by not citing my early work for his argument. As a young new-Left activist and scholar under the influence of Herbert Marcuse, I was much occupied with the issue of Sartre's Marxism from the mid-1960s until Verso's publication of my first book, *Jean-Paul Sartre - Philosophy in the World* (1980). Already in 1978, in *Western Marxism: A Critical Reader*, New Left Review had published, alongside André Gorz's presentation of *The Critique of Dialectical Reason's* contribution to Marxism, my argument that the *Critique* reveals an unbridgeable distance between Sartre's key concepts and those of historical materialism. That claim began a thirty-year silent dialogue between Gorz and myself over whether Sartre's individuals were already social (Gorz's position), or not yet social (my own).

My book traced the entire sweep of Sartre's career, from his earliest explorations of escape from the difficult world to his passionate but conflicted involvement in it, to his embrace of leftist politics, to his attraction to Marxism but rejection of its orthodox Communist forms, to his acceptance of Marxism as the "philosophy of our time" while rethinking it to accommodate our irreducible human freedom and self-determination, and then to his final break with Communism and the old age-induced abandonment of his radical theoretical projects. I concluded that through his rich and multi-faceted career,

Sartre never reconciled his core individualism with his no less powerful social commitments and understandings, those of historical materialism. As I was completing this work, my mentor Marcuse confided to me that my critique of Sartre's individualism matched precisely what he might have said. Understandably, because I had absorbed Marcuse's Marxism, for all of its continuing attachment to Hegel, his embrace of Freud, and his absorption of the Western aesthetic and cultural traditions. I experienced this Marxism as having a coherence and consistency that Sartre, for all his reach and power, never achieved. Thus, although Betschart might have quoted from *Jean-Paul Sartre - Philosophy in the World, Sartre's Second Critique*, or "Sartre's Turning Point" in Paul Arthur Schilpp's *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, I still, perhaps paradoxically, reaffirm this work during our present argument while continuing to argue for the project of existential Marxism.

What is this strange hybrid, existential Marxism? As I said in the *Boston Review*, it is a way of understanding human self-determination within history and society. Placed within social structures that shape and limit them, often oppressing and exploiting them, humans nevertheless signify, surpass, totalize, and transcend. This article was excerpted from my contribution to *The Sartrean Mind*, edited by Constance Mui and Matthew Eshleman, which is being published at the same time as this issue of *Sartre Studies International*. In it I talk about how, in encountering and absorbing Marxism, Sartre stresses the ways in which we make ourselves from what we have been conditioned to become. As he says in *Search for a Method*, "The individual interiorizes his social determinations: he interiorizes the relations of production, the family of his childhood, the historical past, the contemporary institutions, and he then re-exteriorizes these in acts and options which necessarily refer us back to them." Simultaneously understanding the social system and individual, the objective and subjective, in relation to each other, this is existential Marxism's mature and considered way of putting it, and means that even an individual's neurosis is a choice, made under duress, the path chosen by the organism "in order to be able to live an unlivable situation."<sup>2</sup>

Alfred may conclude that this project is useless, uninteresting, or a contradiction in terms. My point, on the contrary, is that it is important and useful to us today, and that Sartre's contributions to it are fundamental. Accordingly, before turning to what Sartre said in 1975 about the relationship of existentialism and Marxism, the crucial question is: What did Sartre actually do concretely as an existen-

tialist taking onboard Marxism? That will tell us both about the promise of existential Marxism and Sartre's contribution to it over a period of thirty years.

First, we must consider the depth and reach of Sartre's own attraction to Marxism, beginning with his rejection of its Soviet version in "Materialism and Revolution" in 1946. As both Marcuse and Sartre knew, the strait-jacket of Soviet dogmatism was unable to stifle completely Marxism's deep sense of human history, its commitment to liberation, its historical-materialist conception of the relation between economics, politics, and culture, its understanding of social class, and its fundamentally democratic commitment. Moreover, there was something profound in common between Sartre's bedrock understanding of individual self-determination and the commitment to collective human self-determination animating even the ugliest forms of Marxism. Despite Stalinism, Sartre resonated with Marxism and, with characteristic ambition, between the mid-1940s and into the 1970s, he sought to give it an adequate theoretical foundation. While my critique of Sartre remains, I was - and still am - awestruck by his range of interests, his depth of understanding, and his sheer theoretical power. One example, as I discuss in my *Dialectics of Disaster*, is his unequaled explanation of Stalinism as rooted in the Bolshevik Revolution's drive to survive in its impossible situation, which I take as a major key to understanding the fate of Soviet Communism. Another is his effort to see how the historical world shaped the individual development and choices of Gustave Flaubert and his contemporaries. Contrary to Alfred's astonishment, I see the third volume of *The Family Idiot* as a profound if incomplete effort to understand the social in the individual and the individual in the social, and thus a contribution to the project of an existentialist Marxism.

That project animated both the 1400 pages of the *Critique* and the 2800 pages of the Flaubert biography. The point is that Sartre's encounter with Marxism was neither casual nor episodic. It went deep and it lasted - over thirty of his forty most productive years. During these years, at the height of his powers, Sartre never thought that existentialist Marxism was a contradiction in terms. Indeed, at the high point of the philosophical side of this project, the second volume of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, we can see him rethinking the core terms of *Being and Nothingness* in terms of historical materialism. I have described this undertaking at length in *Sartre's Second Critique*. What becomes clear in a close reading of *Critique II* is how important this entire project was to Sartre, to

existentialism, and to Marxism. More important than its ultimate frustration is the 500,000-word *Critique* project in which Sartre's monumental ambition is to describe praxis as the basis of structure, to see human activity, no matter how deviated it may become from its original intention, as the source of any human world. I have described at length both the achievement and the inner collapse of the second *Critique*.

As I have done, it is certainly possible to discuss what Sartre did *not* accomplish in these books, especially given that both remained unfinished. But already in 1947, he began to show the influence of his personal, political, and even philosophical encounter with Marxism in the title of his first collection of essays, *Situations*. (In the end, he published ten volumes of *Situations*.) As I say in the introduction to the *New York Review of Books* selection of his essays, with this title alone, the author of the great treatise of freedom, *Being and Nothingness*, signaled his recognition of the constraints on freedom - historical, social, political, and economic - that he was now determined to confront and transform. And, I might add today, to understand. As he thought and wrote, Sartre developed and deployed existential Marxism's hallmarks. The first of these, an increasingly sophisticated understanding of individuals making themselves within, despite, and against social and political structures, can be seen taking shape in widely divergent works such as *Black Orpheus*, *Antisemite and Jew*, *The Condemned of Altona*, and the preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. The second hallmark, Sartre's increasingly critical understanding of the oppressive social systems and structures of capitalism, colonialism, and Communism can be seen in "The Communists and Peace," "Colonialism Is a System," and "Czechoslovakia: The Socialism that Came in From the Cold."

So was this Sartre a Marxist? Defining him is less important than recognizing that he was committed to creating an *existential* Marxism still committed to human self-determination: "the small movement which makes of a totally conditioned social being someone who does not render back completely what his conditioning has given him."<sup>3</sup> Sartre sought to understand individuals and their society, each in terms of the other, in a series of significant political and theoretical interventions. That is, he was trying to reinvent and revitalize our ways of looking at ourselves and our societies so as to bring together perspectives forcibly kept separate virtually everywhere else.

This brings us to what Sartre said in 1975 about his relationship to Marxism after having called it "the philosophy of our time" in 1957. Blind, having given up writing, his two great existential Marx-

ist projects abandoned, having dismissed the French Communist Party since 1968 as a barrier to revolution, having broken finally with the Soviet Union after the invasion of Czechoslovakia, and having lent himself to the wave of anti-Communist *gauchisme* unleashed in 1968 which had now clearly receded, Sartre gave a retrospective interview on his life and work. No longer an active force in the present, Sartre was now looking back on his life and work for the Sartre-volume of Schilpp's *Library of Living Philosophers*.

Betschart quotes from his 45-page reflection as a proof that Sartre was never a Marxist. As I show in my chapter in *The Sartrean Mind*, the interview lends itself to a more complex reading. After the passages quoted by Betschart, Michel Rybalka continues:

Rybalka: *Then what are the elements that you retain of Marxism?*

Sartre: The notion of surplus value, the notion of class—all of that reworked, however, because the working class was never defined by Marx or the Marxists. It is necessary to re-examine these notions, but they remain valid in any case as elements of research.

Rybalka: *And today you no longer consider yourself a Marxist?*

Sartre: No. I think, by the way, that we are witnessing the end of Marxism and that in the next hundred years Marxism will no longer take the form in which we know it.

Rybalka: *Theoretical Marxism, or Marxism as it has been applied?*

Sartre: Marxism as it was applied, but it was also applied as theoretical Marxism. Since Marx, Marxism has existed, living a certain life and at the same time growing old. We are now in the period in which old age moves toward death. Which does not mean that the main notions of Marxism will disappear; on the contrary, they will be taken up again ... but there are too many difficulties in preserving the Marxism of today.

Rybalka: *And what are those difficulties?*

Sartre: I would simply say that the analysis of national and international capitalism in 1848 has little to do with the capitalism of today. A multinational company cannot be explained in the Marxist terms of 1848. A new notion has to be introduced here, one which Marx did not foresee and which therefore is not Marxist in the simple sense of the word.<sup>4</sup>

The main points to note in this excerpt, beside the “no longer” about his relation to Marxism, are Sartre’s assertions that 1) Marxism as we know it is dying; 2) but its main notions “will be taken up again;” 3) in any “new notion,” the development of capitalism since Marx’s time must be accounted for.

All of these assertions are correct. Having proclaimed that Marxism is the philosophy of our time, Sartre undertook the *Critique*

project to understand what caused the “sclerosis” of this philosophy that was “still young, almost in its infancy.” Both volumes of the *Critique* show that the sclerosis stemmed from the Bolshevik Revolution. Sartre’s other studies of the time had also looked at other aspects of the sclerosis, including the bureaucratic French Communist party and its political timidity, and Soviet imperial policy in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. By 1968, Sartre had lost hope in the Communist world, in Marxism’s grand anticipation of socialism’s coming-into-existence. As he was entering into his own decline, certainly by 1975, the Marxism which he had sought to open up was entering into eclipse. The history to which he had hoped to contribute was in fact coming to an end.

In my contribution to *The Sartrean Mind*, I ask what we might make of Sartre’s claim in this interview that Marxism and his existentialism, centered on his idea of freedom, are actually two different philosophies. My answer is that, since he perceives Marxism to be dying, his motivation is clear: Sartre is intent on rescuing his core ideas from Marxism’s demise. Sartre is not at all suggesting that the two modes of thought were antagonistic or incompatible, but is rather saying that he was wrong to call existentialism an “enclave” of Marxism. Sartre is simply stating the obvious, namely, the distinctness of two perspectives whose “links” he spent so much effort exploring. By 1975, it was clear that the “movement of history” in which Marxism had been born and which it had helped to shape had decisively turned away from Marxism’s anticipations and aspirations. Marxism, as demonstrated by the PCF, the Soviet Union, and the anti-Marxism of Sartre’s anti-Communist Maoist friends, was obviously no longer a movement of societal transformation and thus no longer the “philosophy of our time.” In abandoning Marxism, Sartre is revealing that he no longer sees the good society as an ongoing historical project. Henceforth it is only an idea, a form of analysis and understanding, as he makes clear in his final dialogues with Benny Lévy.

In my own way, I said as much in 1995 in *After Marxism*. But it is now clear that my acknowledgment of Marxism’s death, as well as Sartre’s notion that Marxism was dying, was an exaggeration. More correct was my insistence that key aspects of Marxism will remain with us in future radical movements and that Sartre had anticipated a transformation of Marxism to fit capitalism’s current and future evolution. Currently, in fact, emerging from its eclipse, Marxism is being revived and rethought today. In *Search for a Method*, Sartre suggested that one of the reasons why Marxism remains alive is simply

that “we cannot go beyond it because we have not gone beyond the circumstances that engendered it.”<sup>5</sup> We still live under capitalism, and Marxism provides the best available systemic understanding and critique of it. Furthermore, historical materialism enables us to understand the ways in which the economic system and its priorities dominate our social, cultural, and political life—and, increasingly today, our psychological life and relationship with nature.

As I say in my *Boston Review* article, Marxism provides insights into life under capitalism, whether or not a Marxist movement of the working class appears on the scene. And existential Marxism provides insights into how individuals shape themselves within oppressive social structures and how they develop the capacity and will to resist. For that reason alone, even if it is no longer *the* philosophy of our time, Marxism is destined to remain *a* philosophy of our time, a potent source of inspiration and understanding for the young and burgeoning socialist movement. And as I say in the article’s conclusion, for the revival of Marxism to bear fruit, it will have to go to school with Sartre.

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## Notes

1. Ron Aronson, “The Philosophy of Our Time” *Boston Review*, November 14, 2018.
2. Introduction to R.D. Laing and David Cooper, *Reason and Violence* (London, 1964), 7.
3. See Jean-Paul Sartre, “Itinerary of a Thought,” in *New Left Review*, I/58, Nov.-Dec. 1969, 45.
4. See “Interview with Jean-Paul Sartre” in Paul Arthur Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (La Salle: Open Court, 1982), 20-21.
5. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search of a Method* (New York: Knopf, 1963), 30.