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**On the Intelligibility of our Present History:  
The Contemporary Relevance of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*  
and some other Sartrian Texts**

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**Abstract**

*Jean-Paul Sartre is the writer who gave the most trenchant formulation of existentialism and tried to do the same for a version of Marxism, and as a philosopher of history who got it wrong about history and then, in his last "philosophical manifesto" – volume III of the Idiot (English version volume V) – got it brilliantly right. But Sartre did not write the second volume of the Critique. Or, more exactly, he wrote it but he did not publish it. The Critique, as Sartre himself admitted, grew like a hernia on the body of the book on Flaubert, so that it had to be surgically removed and given a life of its own; but a sort of symbiosis persisted, and when it came to the continuation of the argument, Sartre seems to have sensed that volume II was a dead end, and that the route to the alternative would prove to lie after all in the Flaubert project itself. In order to understand Sartre's position, the author analyzes his conception of history, especially of the intelligibility of history by mean of the dialectical reason as a movement of totalization of practical seriality, and shows its actuality.*

**Keywords:** Jean-Paul Sartre, Critique, Dialectics, Reason, History, Politics

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Sartre's three major philosophical works deal respectively, to put things in their simplest terms, with being, with history, and with life – the last with a life lived by a particular being at a particular epoch of history. They all remain strikingly relevant to the beings that we are, living our lives in our own historical moment. It is a moment fraught with troubled uncertainty: where is our present history taking us? Guided by what leaders, towards what ends? I do not say towards what destiny, because that would introduce a historicist prejudice that I reject. And I use the term "leader" with a certain reserve, given Sartre's well-known attitude towards the very idea of a leader – yet there do exist individuals in positions of leadership, exerting the powers of those positions for ends of their own that may need also to be rejected, and resisted. What were Sartre's thoughts about history as such, and about the history he lived? What would he have said about the history we are living? What ought we to say about it?

In the course of this inquiry I will touch on other themes, especially on war and on terror. But I will begin anecdotally, and I ask for your indulgence in that regard. The anecdotes, personal as they are, will make a philosophical point, and that will lead me into the substance of what I want to say. Let me then tell you how, more than a quarter of a century ago, I did not meet Jean-Paul Sartre.

When in the middle 1970s I was writing my *Sartre* an old Paris acquaintance, Jean Pouillon, who was for many years Sartre's colleague at *Les temps modernes*, very kindly asked me if I would like to meet him. I would, of course – but when I thought about it the idea seemed somehow wrong. I knew Sartre through his work, and had made it my task to know the work thoroughly – the philosophical work, that is, not so much the novels and plays, though I obviously could not ignore them altogether. I knew him, therefore, in much the same way as I knew Descartes or Plato or Kant. Meeting great philosophers in the flesh can be disconcerting – they haven't the slightest idea who you are, and if in response to a benign inquiry you tell them you're writing about them the whole thing begins to seem banal (yet another academic: what's worse, one who teaches in America!). I was getting to know my Sartre, the writing one, pretty well, and knew what I wanted to say about him; I wondered if meeting the living one would somehow distort the philosophical image, or skew my rendering of it in the light of some casual remark that would take on disproportionate weight because of having come directly from the source. So I thanked Pouillon and said I thought I would wait until I had finished my book.

In due course the book was finished. I was spending a year in Paris and the Pouillons came to dinner; Jean Pouillon wanted to see it. On the cover of the books in the series for which I had written it – the Routledge "Arguments of the Philosophers" – the publishers had the idea of putting a sample of the handwriting of the philosopher in question; they had rung me up and asked if I could secure a sample of Sartre's handwriting, and I had found a dealer who had sold me a page or two, notes about the failure of the bourgeoisie to understand its rights and freedoms in any light other than as a license to oppress. Pouillon approved of the book – "but whose handwriting is this?" he asked. Certainly it was not Sartre's. He turned to Madame Pouillon, who happens to be a graphologist; definitely not Sartre's, she agreed. I had visions of public humiliation, of the recall of the entire edition for the re-design of the cover. Suddenly Madame Pouillon exclaimed – "It's Simone's!" And so it proved to be: my dealer was right about the provenance of the manuscript, wrong, in this case, about whose hand had written it. It seemed clear that Simone de Beauvoir had been helping Sartre, then becoming blind, in his inveterate habit of getting thoughts on to paper. (This detail may serve as a footnote to the story of the intellectual relations between Sartre and de Beauvoir – she wrote it, but was it only he who thought it?)

Now I was ready to meet Sartre. But I had waited too long. Do him a kindness, said Pouillon, don't ask to meet him now. "*Sartre n'est plus Sartre*," Sartre is no longer Sartre – a wreck of his former self, he could hardly see and could not control some of his bodily functions, while eating, for example. It would be an embarrassment all around. Edward Said had reported to me just such a scene of painful awkwardness at a lunch he had attended, and it would obviously have been not merely pointless but also intrusive to on my part to insist. A few months later I was among the crowds that followed the coffin from the hospital to the cemetery – an enormous "series," in the language of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, turning for a few hours into a rather amorphous "group in fusion," seen as a collective agent certainly by impatient motorists who found themselves, with no idea of what was going on, immobilized by rivers of humanity. Given Sartre's known views on the authoritarian functions of the State it would have been inappropriate, according to his friends, to look for the help or approval of the police for this manifestation.

That, then, was the end of the Sartre I had not met. But it was not the end of *my* Sartre, who continued and continues to be just the author of the roughly ten thousand pages of philosophical writing he published during his lifetime. I had taken the risk in my book of claiming that it was now possible "to see Sartre's work as an essentially completed whole" (Caws 1979, 4), a claim that seemed to be vindicated when he died without producing any more of it. My Sartre was not the "*vieillard détourné*," the old man led astray, whom many critics saw in the last Benny Lévy / Pierre Victor interviews, he was a living figure in the history of contemporary philosophy, whose place there was assured, I thought, if not for all time at least for any future in which philosophy as I knew it would survive.

Sartre's place in the history of philosophy – that I suppose is in part at least what we are here to commemorate. This language opens up a rich vein for reflection. To commemorate, to remember together: the place of memory between the event or the life and their respective histories is one of the topics I want to touch on in what follows. And another is the history of philosophy, contemporary or otherwise, in relation to yet other histories, personal or epochal, including notably our own, especially in the years since 2001 and those to come. Whose Sartre are we talking about? Without elaborating the underlying theory of the mode of being of cultural objects that justifies the assertion (something I'm happy to do on request) I will assert that everyone has his or her own Sartre, in the sense that no two of us have read just the same works, with the same patience or intensity, in the same order, even considering only those published before 1980, that we have different views about the inclusion of the posthumous works, and so on. Some know Sartre in French, others only or mainly through translations; some have focused principally on *Being and Nothingness*, some on the *Critique*, while others have actually worked all the way through *The Family Idiot*. (I cite titles in English, because this paper is written in English,

but here I am talking equally about the French originals – and this is not a trivial point, since the major translations leave a lot to be desired, though I cannot speak for translations into languages other than English.)

Also, to come at last to my main topic, though by an indirect approach, everyone, in an analogous way, has his or her own history. History requires a subject, and a historian; the two are rarely the same, although in my view they start out that way. Each of us has his or her own personal history, more or less complete, more or less reliable (fabulation begins early); as I suggested just now, history is mediated by memory, but at some point we are no longer just remembering the facts about our own past actions and experiences, we have come to rely on the memories of others, but also on documents, on photographs, on possessions, on the enduring works of our hands or brains. And each of us is in one way or another a private historicist: our lives are on a trajectory from past to future, they involve an earlier and a later, recollection and anticipation. It is not that we recall our births or (if we follow Spinoza's advice) anticipate our deaths, indeed as I have remarked elsewhere lived human subjectivity is remarkable in that everything happens as if – from the point of view of the subject him- or herself – it *had* neither beginning nor end. (On reflection that proves to be the case for history in the larger sense too – or rather, history *need* have no beginning or end, it requires neither a myth of creation nor an eschatological myth, even though there are some histories – for example, that of the Roman Empire – which can be told from foundation to dissolution.) It is rather that we tend to order, or to try to order, our own lives as an unfolding story, in which events are dated, explainable and perhaps justifiable in terms of contingencies and purposes. All that history needs are two of the three categories that for Hume defined causality, namely contiguity and succession; into the fact that the third category, constant conjunction, cannot be expected of it can be packed the whole problematic of the philosophy of history.

The subject of my personal history is myself; the subject of the history of the Roman Empire is – the Roman Empire: whatever sort of object that is. The historian of my personal history, when I come to awareness of it *as* a history, is again, in the first instance, myself, though I may have helps in the early stages from doting parents and in later ones from official record-keepers and, if I rise to sufficient eminence, biographers. Who is the historian of the Roman Empire? To simplify the argument let us settle upon Gibbon. But Gibbon's history, as something living, can no longer count on him; what it requires is *us*, his readers; each of us, in reading Gibbon, becomes *pro tem* the historian of the Roman Empire or rather, not exactly *the* Roman Empire, but his or her Roman Empire. I mean no offense to professional historians when I condense these reflections into a maxim: *Only individuals have histories*. I remember that when I floated this idea with a colleague long ago she took me to mean that the only histories are the histories of individuals, rather as Emerson claims

in his essay on History that "there is properly no history; only biography." But that was not at all what I meant. Individuals may start with their own histories, but they may also eventually "have" other histories – the history of the Roman Empire, the history of the Gulf War and its aftermath, the histories of science and technology, the history of philosophy – with Sartre in his place, whatever they may determine that to be.

I have told you who my Sartre is. He fits into my history of philosophy as the writer who gave the most trenchant formulation of existentialism and tried to do the same for a version of Marxism, and as a philosopher of history who got it wrong about history and then, in what I have called his last philosophical manifesto – volume III of the *Idiot*, or in the English version volume V – got it brilliantly right. No, this is not quite fair: he was on the way to getting it right in the first volume of the *Critique*; it was in the second volume that he went wrong. But my Sartre did not write the second volume of the *Critique*. Jean-Paul Sartre, the man I never met, wrote it, but he did not publish it. Granted, writing and not publishing is not the same as not writing – but still it is worth remembering a pointed remark in *Existentialism is a Humanism*: "Why say that Racine could have written another tragedy, when he didn't write it?" (Sartre 1947, 37-38). Suppose we were to adapt this to the *Critique*: "Why say that Sartre could have published another volume of the *Critique*, when he didn't publish it?"

Well, he couldn't publish it because it wasn't finished – so we'll publish it for him; that's what literary executors and devoted scholars do. But why wasn't it finished? I have touched on this problem elsewhere, in an article called "Posthumous Anachronisms in the Work of Sartre" (in Lee 1988: 363-374). The view I take there is that the published work forms a fairly consistent totality, culminating in the third volume of the *Idiot*, and that what remained unpublished was not so much repudiated as side-stepped. Sartre had a habit of referring to forthcoming publications – like the "*future work*" announced in the very last sentence of *Being and Nothingness* – which then failed to appear, not because he had abandoned the project but because it had found one or more alternative outlets, in that case *Saint Genet* and the essay on the Jewish Question. The *Critique*, as Sartre himself admitted, grew like a hernia on the body of the book on Flaubert, so that it had to be surgically removed and given a life of its own; but a sort of symbiosis persisted, and when it came to the continuation of the argument my Sartre seems to have sensed that volume II was a dead end, and that the route to the alternative would prove to lie after all in the Flaubert project itself.

(I may say parenthetically that my choice of a restricted Sartre implies no criticism of those who choose a more inclusive one, up to the "totalization" aimed at by Contat and Rybalka. It is a rich vineyard, with room for many workers.)

Unpacking all this requires some reflection on what, for Sartre, history consisted in. The subtitle chosen by its editors for the second volume of the *Critique* is *The Intelligibility*

*of History*. Intelligibility is clearly a basic desideratum, but the subtitle requires explication with respect to both its terms: what (or whose) history is to be intelligible, what are the criteria for intelligibility? Some such desire seems to characterize the way many individuals think about their personal histories – they want their lives to be meaningful, to make sense in some larger scheme of things. I have called this "the delusion of meaning," suggesting that the quest for "the meaning of life" is doomed to failure, much as the quest for "the meaning of language" might be. The error is easier to see in the latter case: language as such doesn't have meaning, language makes meaning possible. The same is true of life: having life (the point seems almost too simple) is the condition for engaging in meaningful activities, our opportunity for the construction of meanings. The thing to aim for, I suggest, is not the meaning of life but a life of meaning – a life full of the meanings that reside in relations with others, in work, in art and literature and philosophy, in acquaintance with nature and the cultivation of skills and talents. *Living* such a life fully leaves us less liable to the futile search for overarching meanings, either of lives or of histories, that would derive their sense from elsewhere.

The need for a more global interpretation of one's own life, however, dies hard, and Sartre's own trajectory leads with it. He understands from the beginning – it is one of his trademarks, and the underlying theme of *Being and Nothingness* – the contingency of existence, but he wants to grapple with it, to dominate it. In a remarkable letter to Simone de Beauvoir he refers to the irrationalities into which the individual is thrown, and the natural tendency to *mask* them, which "means simply adopting an attitude of inauthenticity toward them." One of the irrationalities of his own life was the atmosphere of preparation for war.

... I realize I was in a state of total inauthenticity about that. I was masking it, and what I wasn't seeing was that our era (1918-1939) derives its meaning from nothing else (in its totality and its smallest details) but a being-for-the-war. So it seems to me for twenty years and at the very core of my nature I had, in spite of myself and unknowingly, an inauthentic being-for-the-war. What should have been done? To live and think this war on the horizon as a specific possibility of this era. Then I would have grasped my *historicity*, which was to be destined for this war (had it even been avoided in '39 and forever, it was no less the concrete meaning of the whole era). Of course, you shouldn't believe that this means I should have resigned myself to it or accepted it. But only considered it as my fate, understood that in *choosing* to be of this era, I was choosing myself for this war. You will answer: You didn't choose this era, you fell into it. No indeed [*Mais non* – that "indeed" mutes the challenge of this interjection]. I will explain that we chose it – and I don't mean that in the metaphysical sense of intelligible choice. But in the concrete sense (Sartre 1992, 315).

So he is looking for the meaning of the era, and also for his own historicity, his participation in that meaning by a concrete choice. There is something Nietzschean in his atti-

tude, wishing to turn "thus it was" into "thus I willed it," after the manner of Zarathustra; also something Hegelian, freely choosing what will be shown to have been necessary. The Left Hegelian Marx is still for the most part in Sartre's future, though his message will clearly be welcome in due course. For the moment this embracing of the contingent as necessary is the key to the existentialist project: thrown forward, the for-itself rides its own facticity, and its good faith lies in its refusal to mask the stark givenness of its situation. And yet to introduce "being-for-war" as a category at the core of existence, to give historical contingency such *ontological* weight, is surely to succumb to a youthful passion for intelligibility that mature reflection will curb. The point deserves a longer argument than there is time for here – it would turn on the relation between the subject and its project, and on what sense it makes to say that something ought to have been my project when it wasn't, but I must leave it for another occasion.

After the war, driven as much by a sharpened political awareness as by the inner development of his own thought, came Sartre's well-known turn towards Marxism. Happy neither with Moscow nor with Washington, he nevertheless aligned himself with socialism rather than capitalism, an obvious choice for someone with his experience and sympathies – and antipathies, for example towards the bourgeoisie. But with Marx came philosophical baggage that would encumber him for years. It has always seemed to me that Marx made a fortunate choice in following Feuerbach, an unfortunate one in following Hegel. "Dialectical materialism" is an oxymoron, not as everyone knows directly attributable to Marx, but as a slogan to Plekhanov and as a theory (in the form of an impossible "dialectics of nature") to Engels. Historical materialism makes sense for limited episodes, involving climate, scarcity, migration, technology and so on, and history, as understood by historians, can plausibly be given, often enough, a dialectical structure. But the attempt to invert Hegel's absolute and totalizing idealism, with its world-historical pretensions to intelligibility and completeness, and stand it on materialist feet, was as I see it doomed to failure from the beginning. The best model for the dialectic is Platonic, not Hegelian: beginning *in medias res*, and ending when the participants in the dialogue get tired and go home, it draws its philosophical power from its philosophical modesty. Applied to history, it can make sense of particular epochs and even particular contradictions and their particular *Aufhebungen*, but the attempt to embed these in any sort of total historical necessity represents a fatal overstepping of inherent limitations.

At the time of the *Critique* Sartre has not yet come to terms with these limitations; he is still under the spell of what might be called the "lure of totalization," and his project is to show how History (with a capital H) can be understood dialectically. Understanding is the work of reason, and dialectical reason, "the very movement of totalization," is the road to it for historical purposes. I have expressed elsewhere my reservations about this name –

it has sometimes seemed to me that Sartre chose it merely in order to have a title that would echo Kant's. I do not think it serves in any useful way to designate a special kind of reason ("pure reason" and "practical reason" in Kant represent different modalities, not different kinds), and it has led to pointless misunderstandings, notably in the controversy with Lévi-Strauss. So when I speak of the contemporary relevance of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* I do not mean the relevance of the concept that gives the book its title, but the relevance of the arguments that the book contains.

The philosophical importance and the contemporary relevance of the *Critique* lie for me in the way in which Sartre works out the theory of the group. Like Marx, to whom he appeals in the prefatory *Problem of Method*, he wants to base his work on what is unequivocally given:

We willingly grant that the group never has and never can have the type of metaphysical existence which people try to give to it. We repeat with Marxism: there are only men and real relations between men. From this point of view, the group is in one sense only a multiplicity of relations and of relations among those relations.

So the task of the book is to work out a theory that will explain how real individuals, each a free project, jointly produce an intelligible history. This involves a true dialectic, in that there is a progression from a neutral position, via practical seriality and the various stages of group formation, to a situation in which conflict emerges between individuals and institutions, between leaders and the rank-and-file, potentially between citizens and governments. It is a dialectic that has a cyclical form, repeating itself endlessly, not from some remote beginning to some remote end, but from a concrete situation to its equally concrete outcome. We are not condemned to this endless repetition – the very purpose of theory, after all, is to enable people to avoid predictable outcomes – but if we understand its likelihood we will be in a better position to develop strategies of avoidance.

The most significant lesson of this analysis seems to me to lie in Sartre's understanding of how revolutionary group practice emerges from a consciousness of seriality. It is a lesson we need to learn more urgently than ever, but one whose application is more difficult than ever. The secret of successful political repression (whether or not recognized under that name) is to ensure that the people constitute and continue to constitute a series – in relation to popular culture, to consumer markets, to communications, to the law, to governmental administration – that never rises to group awareness. The old way to break out of this bind, through the group-in-fusion and the sworn group, with its fraternity-terror, led all too quickly (in the history of Soviet politics, for example) to the emergence of an institutional elite and the consequent re-emergence of seriality. Sartre does not himself arrive at a new way, but he sets up the challenge for us. What he does offer is an exquisitely detailed set of observations of the process at work in particular social and political contexts.



It is a historical process, but its intelligibility shows through most convincingly in local rather than in global contexts: small totalizations rather than large ones. Even there history proves to be elusive. One of Sartre's vivid analyses traces the intelligible moves in the collective praxis of a game of football, and a great moment of comic (but at the same time profound) insight comes in a wry footnote to this account: "In fact, in a football match, everything is complicated by the presence of the opposite team" (Sartre 1976, 473). (The enveloping structure of organized competition is further worked out early in the second volume with his account of the world of boxing.) The dream of final totalization is thwarted by such considerations – the dialectic unfolds smoothly only as long as it is a collaborative process, but (as Engels realized long ago) there are too many conflicting projects and desires to permit any sort of rational outcome on the largest scale.

That is why the project of the second volume, the intelligibility of history in some all-encompassing sense, has to be abandoned. While the first volume ends with what seems to me a desperate gesture towards what Sartre calls "totalization without a totalizer," the second aims at the much more ambitious concept of a "totalization of envelopment," in the light of which the whole course of human events might fall into place. The problem with such a grandiose history, of the world, of mankind, is that it lacks a specifiable subject. The candidate for the status of such a subject, in the Marxist historicism of the Critique (and in the name of the French Communist daily), is "Humanity," but as Sartre eventually comes to see

... humanity *is not* and does not respond diachronically to any concept; what does exist is an infinite series whose law is recurrence, defined precisely in these terms: man is the son of man. For this reason history is perpetually finite, composed of broken sequences, each of which is the *deviated* (not mechanically but dialectically) continuation of the one before as well as the surpassing of that preceding sequence toward ends that are the *same* and *other* ... (Sartre 1994, 403-404)

According to this view histories (in the plural) would be relatively local; they would have the sense we give them, we would not be inclined to think that they had to be part of some cosmic venture, some destiny of mankind, some working-out of Providential purposes. Such a view has immediate and useful implications for our understanding of current events.

Combining the theory of groups with this somewhat chastened theory of history we can read the present world situation as one of massive seriality, maintained by the technology of dissemination, in which institutional hierarchies, mainly fundamentalist in tendency, manipulate their respective (serialized) publics in order to implement their own conflicting visions of world history, driven by ambitions of economic and ideological domination. These visions are delusional, and criminally dangerous. A general realization, on the part of a sufficient number of individual subjects, of their condition of exploited seriality, and at

the same time of the emptiness of the world-historical schemas that drive the conflicts into which they are repeatedly drawn, would undercut this situation. The powers that profit from it cannot allow this to happen. It is to Sartre's credit that he was willing to be convinced, in the end, of the emptiness of the Marxist schema in which he had invested such energy and such hope. But where did that leave him in relation to the history of his own epoch?

World War II was not Sartre's only war. The two others in which his interest and influence were engaged were the Algerian war of 1954-1962 and the Vietnam war of 1964-1975. In effect there is also a third: the (potential) World War III that seemed to loom so imminently in the late 1940s. In speaking of them he no longer invokes being-for war but goes more deeply into the social, psychological, and political causes and by-products of conflict. What he finds, and what he says, tally so closely with some of the issues involved in our contemporary wars – the phony one and the real one – that I shall take the liberty of dealing with them all as variants on a common theme. By the phony war I mean of course the so-called "war on terror" (2001 to date), and by the real one the shamefully one-sided Iraq war (2003 to date). All these wars were embedded in histories: the history of colonialism, the history of anticommunism, the history of nuclear armaments, the history of radical Islam, the history of the technology of petroleum. To understand this embedding a few more remarks on history – not directly influenced by Sartre – are in order.

I sometimes find it useful to talk about two kinds of history, which I will call history 1 and history 2. History 1 isn't really history at all, although it is what a lot of people seem to mean when they use the term – it is whatever "really happens," as it happens, as if this were something frozen and could be recaptured. History 2 is what we say about what happened, how we connect it to other things that happened, how we categorize it, how we explain it. History 1 is over as soon as it has happened; history 2 can begin only when memory has done its preliminary work of recognition and comparison. History 1 is given, if you can catch it; history 2 is chosen, not as to its basis in events but as to its structure in their mutual relations. Consider what is generally taken to have been the defining event of our recent history, the attack on the World Trade towers on September 11, 2001. As history 1 it was indeed captured, in multiple and endlessly recirculated images, images which live in the memory of millions of people who, thanks to the media, witnessed it at a distance. But what sort of event was it? An outright act of war? A criminal act? A brilliant guerrilla stroke carried into enemy territory? And to what history 2 does it belong? To the history of fundamentalist alienation, to the history of American imperialism, or to some other history, of aviation or of urbanization for example?

In fact the event clearly belongs to all those histories, and more. But what happened was that it was instantly inscribed, by the President of the United States, in a fantastic history of pure but embattled democracy as an object of primitive resentment and hatred. He chose to

construe it as an act of war that instantly and unilaterally put the government of the United States on a war footing, even though according to its Constitution the country cannot be placed in such a position except by a declaration, after due deliberation, on the part of Congress. No serious opportunity was afforded for such deliberation, and no such declaration was ever made. The war was to be a "war on terror," and under that name it has cost so far something on the order of a hundred thousand unnecessary deaths and two hundred billion unnecessary dollars. The choice of this particular history, backed by another and even more fateful choice – that of one of the oldest of mythical historicisms, apocalyptic Christianity – may prove to have been the defining tragedy of our time.

Terror is an exaggerated form of fear, and the war on terror has played on the fears of the American people, unaccustomed as they are to threats at home. Terrorism depends for its success on inspiring fear, and those who encourage fear, who use it to whip up wrath against enemies, real or imagined, are really doing the terrorists' work. Sartre calls them "*imbéciles*," and that seems singularly appropriate: Latin *imbecillus* meant originally physical weakness, possibly even (conjecturally) unreadiness for war, but it came to mean "lacking intellectual or moral strength." Sartre knew something about terror, and about fear – what would he have said about these developments? Extreme fear has its place, for him, in the emergence of some (though surely not all) groups, when their survival is at risk and members in effect put their lives in one another's hands; this is the "fraternity-terror" of the *Critique*, which comes into play when I swear that, if I fail my brothers, they may kill me. In the present context, though, the *Critique* is not perhaps the most relevant text (even though it does contain an analysis of the concept of Terror, especially in relation to the French revolution, in which however Sartre points out that the concept corresponds to no single essence (Sartre 1976, 597n)).

His thoughts about fear surface most prominently in his reflections about the dangers of World War III, those about terror (in its contemporary political sense) in his reflections on the Algerian war, notably in the preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. In both cases succumbing to the threat is both a consequence and a cause of dehumanization. "This war will be the war of fear," he writes in 1946:

... if we keep on waiting for it all this time, if we have to souse ourselves in fear for fifty years, if we convince ourselves that we must wait until the coming war is over before we can start living, then we will have made the Bomb three-quarters useless: there will not be any men left to kill; that will have been done already (Contat and Rybalka 1974/1, 157).

The sinister thing about this fear is the policies it will provoke in governments that fall prey to it, the carnage that will follow if they use their technological power to conduct war at a distance:

Then the abstract massacre will start. ... Technicians off in Washington and Texas will set up a slaughterhouse in Baku or in Leningrad and never even see it. Never even imagine it. No heroes; no martyrs: just a cataclysm coming down on panic-stricken animals (*ibid.*).

Change Baku and Leningrad to Baghdad and Fallujah, change technicians to politicians – but we don't even have to change Washington or Texas. Granted that our present war is not the nuclear war about which Sartre was writing; granted that there is still some combat on the ground – but the shock and awe of overwhelming firepower are as morally repugnant now as the idea of the bomb was then.

In this and other texts of the post-World War II period one cannot help being struck by the way in which the fear that pervaded society then because of the Communist threat anticipates the fear that pervades our own society now (I speak principally for the United States) because of the terrorist threat. Fear of the Soviet Union fueled American anti-communism in the fifties, fear of Al Qaeda fuels American anti-terrorism in the present decades. The current version is the more pathetically disproportionate to the threat, empowering as it does a small group of essentially stateless outlaws who happen to have pulled off one dramatic, brilliant, large scale, and thanks to the media very public coup against the image of the corporate West, and who have been allowed thereby to determine the economic future of the world's theretofore richest and most powerful state. That this was, abstractly regarded, an evil act hardly needs arguing, but then evil acts abound, and Sartre would certainly want to remind us of this: their evil does not excuse our evil, we cannot expect to go unscathed.

In the context of the Algerian war it is not that Sartre condones terror – he simply points out that those who rule by terror can expect to be repaid in terror. His description of the colonial oppressor is merciless:

... this imperious being, crazed by his absolute power and by the fear of losing it, no longer remembers clearly that he was once a man; he takes himself for a horsewhip or a gun; he has come to believe that the domestication of the "inferior races" will come about by the conditioning of their reflexes. But in this he leaves out of account the human memory and the ineffaceable marks left upon it; and then, above all, there is something which perhaps he has never known: we only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us. .... [T]hese constantly renewed aggressions, far from bringing them to submission, thrust them into an unbearable contradiction which the European will pay for sooner or later (Fanon 1968,16).

Once again, under a fairly obvious application of the rule of *mutatis mutandis*, the relevance of this passage to our present history is clear enough. The futility of a policy of

"constantly renewed aggressions" on the part of leaders who put their confidence in military, rather than in intellectual or moral, strength, ought by now to be apparent.

Would Sartre be able to do anything more about this now than he was able to do at the time of Vietnam, for example? If the leaders were unreachable then, they seem even more so now. We can at least be sure that if Sartre were alive today he would be ready to convoke an "Iraq tribunal" along the lines of the Russell Vietnam tribunal. (But who corresponds to Russell today? And who to Sartre?) I will cite in conclusion what he said at the opening session of the Russell tribunal:

In truth, we would wish, with press collaboration, to maintain constant contact between ourselves and the masses all over the world who are painfully watching the tragedy in Vietnam. We hope that they will be learning while we learn, that they will watch and understand, and come to their own conclusions. .... It is for the peoples of the world and, in particular, the American people that we are working (Sartre 1968).

"The American people": as an adopted American I once again ask for your indulgence, this time for bringing the burden of an American conscience to this celebration. But Sartre would have understood. In fact he often expressed such solidarity with the American people. In a text from 1948 on the looming struggle between the USA and the USSR ("We Must Have Peace to Remake the World") he says:

We could not possibly conceive of ourselves fighting a democratic people who have often shown an admirable sense of freedom. It is true that this sense is being lost, but it is being lost to the extent that the United States is afraid a war will start and is getting ready for it (Contat and Rybalka 1974/2, 194).

Two more strikingly prescient texts, reading "Iraq" for "Vietnam" in the first and modifying the second to indicate that the United States is afraid a war has already started.

As I said above, the conclusion that we are at war depends on our choice of a history, and Sartre would undoubtedly join me in repudiating the choice that some of our leaders have made for us. He would have us choose a history based on freedom rather than on fear – freedom not simply from the threat of others, and not simply for unrestrained consumption and selfish satisfaction, but for the openness of the future to human projects, individual or collective, in mutual respect and for mutual welfare. To work towards such a history would be the most fitting tribute to his memory.

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