Abstract
This chapter provides an overview of Sartre’s developing and ongoing relationship with Marxism throughout his career. In particular, it highlights the fact that numerous areas of overlap can be clearly identified with Marxism in Sartre’s work much earlier than has often been argued. The presence of Marxist concepts can be traced back to at least 1940 in Sartre’s writings and his subsequent preoccupation with ethics throughout that decade also bears the influence of Marx and in particular Trotsky. Sartre’s existentialist Marxist magnum opus The Critique of Dialectical Reason offered a conceptually innovative re-formulation of many central Marxist theses and was, it is argued, the logical outcome and flowering of many of the arguments advanced and developed by Sartre over the preceding two decades.

Sartre
by Sam Coombes.

The general overall trajectory of Sartre’s career is well known, as is the fact that by no means all of it sits easily or unquestionably in the ‘Marxist’ category, at least not in any classic sense of that term: from the libertarian semi-anarchist phenomenologist positions of the 1930s to Sartre’s awakening to the importance history at the start of World War II; to existentialist humanism tending increasingly towards Marxism in the postwar years, and polemical debates with the French Communist Party; to the Communist fellow-travelling years (1952-56); to the work which came to be seen as epitomizing ‘Sartre’s Marxism’, The Critique of Dialectical Reason (1960); to ultimately a rather dichotomous positioning on Sartre’s part which on the one hand saw him produce the gargantuanly erudite Family Idiot and on the other involve himself in militant Maoist-tending political activism.

The Critique remains Sartre’s most sustained engagement with Marxist philosophy and, in the absence for many years (in fact until the early 1980s) of works such as The War Diaries (1983 [1939-40]) and Notebooks for an Ethics (1983 [1947-8]), was understandably taken by many commentators to signal a marked rupture with Sartre’s earlier and especially pre-war works. One central reason for this reading was the assumption that Being and Nothingness (1943), Sartre’s most sizeable theoretical work of the 1940s, was very largely expressive and representative of all the key tenets of his thought in the ‘early’ period. But for all that Sartre was voluble and loquacious, he was often also tantalizingly elliptical. One only has to consider the number of unfinished and unpublished manuscripts throughout his career, and those instances in which what would appear to be a topic of absolutely central importance to a given theoretical discussion is sidelined in a few short sentences, to take cognizance of the fact that Sartre’s expositions of his ideas are often far from complete. In Being and Nothingness, which although a work of ‘phenomenological-ontology’ does in fact contain claims that are highly suggestive for ethics, the reader is only briefly informed that the implications of Sartre’s ontological claims for ethical conduct will have to await a subsequent work. This work, published posthumously as Notebooks for an Ethics, never saw light of day in the period and hence successive generations of Sartre commentators associated Sartrian ethics with the over archingly inauthentic outlook and exclusively negative view of interpersonal relations expressed in Being and Nothingness, in ignorance of the positive ethics of generosity and reciprocity which he had formulated in the interim period. Quite how Sartre became the passionate advocate of socialism that he did in What Is Literature? (1948) whilst being assumed
to continue believing that ‘hell is other people’ (No Exit (1945)) would only become fully apparent after his death.

There has long been debate about the way in which the early humanist Marx relates to the later economics-focused Marx of *Capital*. The prevalence of later Engelsian-derived diamat in the Stalinist era gave rise to the commonly-held view in both communist and liberal circles that Marxian theory, supposed to enjoy the status of scientific truth, did not contain ethical and moral presuppositions. There is a noticeable lack of discussion of these fields in Marx’s writings, Marx, as Yvon Quiniou reminds us, stressing the primacy of politics in relation to morality, often presented as of a piece with bourgeois ideology. Quiniou argues that an ‘economic normativity’ can nevertheless be clearly detected in Marx’s thought, problematic though it in some ways is: ‘Its presence is evident: Marx explicitly acknowledged its pivotal role in the shaping of his theoretico-practical itinerary.’ (Quiniou 2002, 65, translation mine) R.G. Peffer confirms this reading, referring to reconstructing Marx’s ‘implicit moral theory’ despite the difficulty posed by the ‘submerged character’ of Marx’s moral views (Peffer 1990, 4).

Taking this idea of continuity in Marxian thought as a basis, there are good reasons for viewing the early Sartrean conception of the subject as in important respects reminiscent of that of the early Marx of *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, which had become available in France in 1937-38. Marx had stressed the centrality of creative labour to the human condition opposing creative labour to alienation. As Sartre was to do later, the early Marx highlighted the importance of subjective agency and self-realisation. This ethical humanist Marxist view of the subject accords well with the Sartrean insistence, stretching from Sartre’s earliest theoretical writings of the 1930s through to the *Critique* and beyond, on the fundamental inalienability of the freedom of the individual. Even in the *Critique* Sartre was to reject notions of absolute historical determination or of any sort of collective consciousness (Flynn 1984, 110), despite for many years by this stage having accepted the idea that individuals were fully conditioned by their circumstances. If the Marxist Sartre of the *Critique* accepts entirely Marx’s dictum that ‘[m]en make history but not in circumstances of their own making’ (Marx 2009, 87), this is a view which can be traced back in his writings until at least 1945 and arguably even the *War Diaries* (1939-40).

In what follows, it is hence the continuity in Sartre’s thinking rather than rupture which will be the guiding thread. *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), as well as being a major stand-alone contribution to Marxist theory, will be presented as to some extent the logical outcome and culmination point of many years of development in Sartre’s intellectual itinerary. It is worth noting in this regard that even as late as an interview of 1975 Sartre declared an abiding fidelity to the conception of the translucidity of consciousness which he had set out over thirty years previously in *Being and Nothingness*, and generally showed himself not to be in disagreement with many of his fundamental earlier claims (Schlipp 1981, 23). Critical studies appraising the extent to which the claims of the *Critique* conform to classic Marxist categories are numerous (Desan (1965), Flynn (1984)). I will address some of these issues but as a logical extension of a broader discussion of Sartre’s development towards Marxism in the post-WWII period.

---

1 This point was defended by Quiniou in ‘La Morale de Marx’, a paper given at Université Paris VIII, (25/1/2001).
Sartre’s Turn Towards Marxism

The first explicit references to concepts which can be clearly associated with Marxist thinking are to be found in Sartre’s *War Diaries*. In one passage of scathing self-criticism Sartre comments that ‘I am undoubtedly a monstrous product of capitalism, parlementarianism, centralisation and the civil service’ (Sartre 1984, 435). As Sartre’s self-analysis in the diaries develops there is more broadly a perceptible shift in the direction of the sort of opposition between the abstract and the concrete of material conditions which is commonly to be found in classic Marxism. Sartre wonders how he had been able during the 1930s to turn a blind eye to the influence which objective circumstances could exert over his freedom: ‘this way of mine of taking refuge at the top of the tower, when it is being attacked from below, and of looking down without so much as blinking’ (Sartre 1984, 473)

Sartre’s rejection of his pre-war bourgeois self in the name of a newfound acknowledgement of material and social conditions of possibility was to take a more explicitly theoretical formulation in his postwar writings, and indeed a formulation which was soon to start anticipating the schemas of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in key ways. ‘For fifteen years now,’ Sartre later remarked in an interview of 1960, ‘I have been looking for something: it is a matter […] of giving a political foundation to anthropology’ (Sartre 1971, 9, translation mine) and it is in the founding text to the *Temps Modernes* journal that he both rejects the 19th century liberal conception of rights as inadequate and explains that man is best understood as a synthetic whole, that is as a totality (Sartre 1946, 23), which involves acknowledging not only that he is necessarily in situation but also that he is conditioned by his economic circumstances and by his social class. Such situational constraints encroach much more significantly on subjective freedom than those discussed in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre calls for a synthetic anthropology, indicating that ontological freedom, though not reducible to or determined by situation, nevertheless cannot simply transcend the conditioning it produces. The synthetic conception of reality is opposed to ‘analytical’ thought, these contrasting categories corresponding to proto-Marxist thought on the one hand and bourgeois and liberal thought on the one hand on the other. Man understood as a synthetic whole is a totality, but Sartre goes on formulates for the first time a position which would remain central to his existential Marxism until the *Critique* and beyond: Sartre argues that the capacity for subjective self-determination must nevertheless be safeguarded: ‘I can accept without difficulty that a man, even though his situation conditions him completely, can be a locus of irreducible indeterminacy’. In the *Critique*, Sartre describes his method as ‘regressive-progressive and analytico-synthetic’ (Sartre 1982, 88). Although the regressive-progressive method would accord a more central place to the dialectical interaction between the free subject and his socio-historical situation than the position Sartre advances in the founding text to *Les Temps Modernes* does, the basic idea of the subject who is conditioned by history and yet free to act upon and change her circumstances remains the same.

In 1946, Sartre produced a text entirely devoted to questions of Marxist philosophy and political practice, entitled *Materialisme et Revolution*, which has tended not to receive the full attention it merits in the critical literature. In this text, and notably in a revised version of 1949 in which a number of footnotes concerning Marx were added, Sartre effectively recuperates the thought of Marx, saving it from the clutches of mechanistic Stalinist doctrine. Stalinist Marxism, in its insistence on a rigidly deterministic conception of historical change, effectively writes the free
subject out of history, thereby rendering the revolutionary project at the heart of Marx’s thought impossible, Sartre observes. Stalinist diamat, he concludes, is a debased and crude version of the theory contained in Engels’ *Anti-Dühring* (1878) in its attempt to ally a flat assertion of material reality to the dialectical schema contained in Hegel’s *Logic*: historical change becomes a function of a dialectics of nature, whereas in the later Marx the dialectic had been interpreted much more loosely. The revolutionary, Sartre ripostes, must be ontologically free if he is to have any chance of emancipating himself from his constraining socio-economic situation; however socio-economically unfree the worker might be, he remains free to make choices such as whether or not to revolt. The distinction which Sartre maintains here and throughout this text between the subjective and the political types of freedom is the direct descendant of that established between freedom in situation and ontological freedom in *Being and Nothingness*.

The influence of Maurice Merleau-Ponty on Sartre’s thinking during the postwar years was pivotal in the development of his political thought, even if their itineraries were ultimately to lead them in contrasting directions, Merleau-Ponty away from explicit support for Marxism whilst Sartre towards a number of years of fellow-travelling with the Communist Party (1952-56 notably). Sartre was later to acknowledge openly his indebtedness to his erstwhile political editor at the *Temps Modernes* in his obituary for Merleau-Ponty (1961). Moreover, in the mid 1940s when Sartre and the French communist left were caught in a deadlock of mutual misunderstanding and misrepresentation, Merleau-Ponty played the role of intermediary in debate, his position being close enough to both to illuminate the inadequacies of each side. He stood almost entirely alone in his insistence on the compatibility of existentialism and Marxism and was the only thinker in the immediate postwar years who argued forcefully for their reconciliation.

**The Cold War, Marxist aesthetics and socialist ethics**

If the fellow-travelling years (1952-56) are largely put to one side being recognized as they most commonly are as having been essentially an error of judgment on Sartre’s part, Sartre’s most significant Marxist writings prior to the *Critique* are constituted by a cluster of texts written in the late 1940s. The themes central to *What Is Literature?* (1950 [1948]), the posthumously published *Notebooks for an Ethics* (1983), and *Dirty Hands* (1948) link up in manifold ways and indicate an evolution in Sartre’s political thought which involve developing perspectives on both aesthetics and ethics. Also of note in this period is Sartre’s attempt to form a political group, the ‘Rassemblement Démocratique et Révolutionnaire’ (R.D.R.) in 1948 whose objective was to create a cross-party association unifying leftists seeking to escape the growing East-West Cold War polarity and envisage an independent role for Europe. The R.D.R. proved short-lived, partly because of the intense fire it immediately came under from the P.C.F., but it offers evidence of Sartre’s willingness to implicate himself in active politics. It also puts his fellow-travelling period of the 1950s into a fresh perspective clearly suggesting as it does that if Sartre was ultimately to side whole-heartedly with Soviet-led Communism during the Cold War years, accepting such a polarity was not his preferred choice.

---

2 Michael Kelly, in ‘Towards a heuristic method: Sartre and Lefebvre’ *Sartre Studies International* Vol. 5, No. 1, 1999 pp. 5–6, suggests that Lefebvre’s overt hostility to Sartre’s thought in his full-length study *L’Existentialisme* masked important areas of common ground shared by the two thinkers.
Notebooks for an Ethics essentially comprise two principal thematic focii, on the one hand a dialectics of history which in fact builds on earlier tentative reflections on the topic in the War Diaries and anticipates that of the Critique, and on the other a socialist ethics which reverses the negative ethics of Being and Nothingness and, in its instantiation in Dirty Hands, is reminiscent of the Marxist ethics set out by Trotsky in Their Morals and Ours (1938), which Sartre had learnt of when reading the writings of Merleau-Ponty. As regards historiography, however, whereas Merleau-Ponty’s enquiries into the ‘sens’ of history in Sense and non-sense (1948) were ultimately limited to explaining the ambiguity and unpredictability of the existential present, from Notebooks through to the Critique Sartre endeavours to elaborate an existentialist version of the Hegelian dialectic so as to propose a new global account of history’s forward movement. In Notebooks, moreover, it is not only history which is understood as having a fundamentally political dimension. Certain key questions of ethics are similarly presented as intertwined with matters of political theory and practice: ‘Morality today must be revolutionary socialist’ (Sartre 1992, 18), claims Sartre in the first notebook of the series. Moreover, in many places in Notebooks, Sartre presents questions of history and of ethics as interconnecting: ‘Morality must be historical’ (Sartre 1992, 12); ‘The end of History will be the advent of Morality’ (Sartre 1992, 91). Sartre hereby intertwines historiography, ethics and politics, as the latter two categories are conceived of as being thoroughly imbricated in the historical dialectic which is already understood as a dialectic of individual subject and history as it will subsequently be in the Critique.

The ‘Morality’ Sartre refers to is by definition a socialist morality of solidarity and reciprocity. This historicized, politicized morality is in Notebooks also a positive conception of intersubjective ethics which overturns the exclusively negative morality of Being and Nothingness. Once the project to seek to be omnipotent, or like God, following the ethical conversion Sartre had referred to in the earlier work is cast aside, relations characterized by generosity, gift-giving, and even love become possible. The individual subject no longer needs to seek to ground herself in the world in the manner of the ‘spirit of seriousness’ and need no longer concoct narratives for herself in order to conceal from herself uncomfortable truths (mauvaise foi). In a state of ‘pure’ rather than ‘impure reflection’, it becomes possible for the subject to commit him or herself fully not just ontologically (which as Sartre had explained in Existentialism is a Humanism was always inevitable) but also ethically and politically. In its political dimension, commitment for Sartre now means active engagement in the direction of attempting to ensure that socialism becomes a political reality.

What Is Literature? is known for being the archetypal Sartrean assertion of the need for commitment in writing. Flaubert and Goncourt had been charged as responsible for the repression that followed the Paris Commune in the founding text of the Temps Modernes (1945) because they had not written a word against it, and What Is Literature? confirms a tendency in Sartre’s thinking in this period towards a certain functionalist reductionism with respect to prose writing. However, in marked contrast with the Zdanovist criterion of ‘ideological correctness’, Sartre’s politicisation of prose is founded on the idea of the total responsibility of the prose writer. In Existentialism is a Humanism Sartre had adhered explicitly to the Kantian universalist notion that one could not want freedom for oneself without seeking to ensure it for others at the same time; one could only enjoy genuine freedom if others also were free. And as Sartre equates the political ideal of socialism with greater emancipation for all, then it follows that on his view the prose writer, whose use of
prose as opposed to poetry commits him inevitably one way or the other in any case, must actively strive to encourage his readers to militate in favour of socialism.

These conceptions of ethics, politics, responsibility and commitment come together in the debates which lie at the heart of Dirty Hands (1948). Although described by Sartre as as non-partisan (Howells 1988, 90), that is as about politics rather than politically committed, the centrepiece of the work is Sartre’s examination of questions of principles versus pragmatism, and ends versus means which lie at the heart of classic Marxist political philosophy and had been articulated with particular clarity by Trotsky in Their Morals and Ours. Trotsky was perhaps the most notable advocate of the idea that the Marxist world-view was not an amoralism, as scientific Marxists and Marxism’s liberal critics would have it, but rather was founded on an alternative conception of morality. Sartre’s Notebooks contain a nine-page discussion of the work, but its influence on his thinking can be perceived much more broadly in the blend of historiography, ethics and politics which characterises his reflections throughout. Its influence is also vital to Dirty Hands (1948) whose central action, the assassination of a revolutionary political leader named Hoederer, had in any case been inspired by the murder of Trotsky in 1940 (De Beauvoir 2001, 209-210).3 The accusation of ‘amoralism’ levelled at Marxism and Bolshevism by liberal democrats, Trotsky argued, was founded on a limited and historically naive conception of morality. Marxism’s liberal critics failed to see that sets of moral values were relative to their historical context and to the stage the class struggle had reached. The bourgeois democratic conception of morality was that which corresponded to the era of progressive capitalism. As this era came under threat from the rise of the working class, however, a new type of morality came into focus which Trotsky termed ‘the morality of proletarian revolution.’ (Trotsky 1985, 45) This conception, founded on the class struggle, the dialectical materialist view of history and the goal of a future socialist revolution, was mistakenly charged with being an amoralism because it did not acknowledge the principles of bourgeois morality. In Dirty Hands Hoederer, whose outlook Sartre commented was the only one which seemed to him to be a laudable one, demonstrates to the young bourgeois idealist Hugo, that his moral purism and insistence on principles has nothing to do with the type of politicized ethics which he and his comrades defend.

The Crystallizing of a Dialectics of Subject and History

Sartre’s dialectic is founded on the idea of an interactive relationship between the individual subject and his or her historical context. In later interviews Sartre was to date his interest in dialectics to the immediate postwar years (Schlipp 1981, 18) and it is well known that his first serious contact with the work of Hegel was stimulated by the research of Alexandre Kojèве on the German philosopher during these years. In the Critique, the Sartrean version of the dialectic is given expression notably through the ‘progressive-regressive’ method. Sartre sets dialectical reason against analytical reason, the former being a more detailed and sophisticated version of the synthetic conception of man which he had argued for in the founding text of the Temps modernes. In the Critique the focus is more squarely on the ‘regressive’ moment, the aim of which being to work one’s way back to the component parts of a given entity under scrutiny. Via this ‘regressive’ movement back to all the components and

---

3 Ian Birchall, in his Sartre Against Stalinism (Oxford: Berghahn, 2004) pp. 85–6, provides a detailed and convincing examination of the evidence substantiating the link with the assassination of Trotsky.
conditioning of a social, historical and economic nature which lead to that entity having become what it now is, i.e. a synthetic totality, we can gain a better understanding of its actions and possibilities in the present. Conditioning, however all encompassing, is never synonymous for Sartre with rigid social determinism though as is demonstrated by the example he gives of French writer Paul Valéry: ‘Valéry was a petit bourgeois intellectual […] But not all petit bourgeois intellectuals were Valéry’ (Sartre 1982, 40). Any given individual has the capacity through his or her actions to move beyond the possibilities apparently allowed by his or her socio-historical conditioning.

Sartre’s dialectic is clearly of a very different variety from the more abstractly Hegelian version of it integral to Stalinist ‘diamat’, which involved a philosophically unconvincing marriage of Hegelian dialectics as articulated in the Logic with a flat assertion of materialism. But it also contrasts with that of the mature Marx, despite the allegiance which Sartre declares to Marxian thought near the start of Search for a Method (1957), the immediate theoretical predecessor to the Critique and published in the same volume (Sartre 1982, 29). Whereas Marx, as Henri Lefebvre pointed out reintroduced a version of the dialectic to explain the relationships between economic categories in the process of generating capital (Lefebvre, 1948), Sartre’s focus is the dialectical working of human praxis in a milieu of scarcity. Praxis begins to assume the alienated characteristics of scarcity itself in the ‘practico-inert’ field (a concept which in the later Sartre’s work substitutes by and large for materialism) and human collectivities assume the passive character of ‘seriality’. However seriality is countered by the positive praxis by which what Sartre terms the ‘group in fusion’ comes into being. Whereas the concept of the ‘series’ expresses intersubjective alienation as in the well-known example Sartre gives of individuals constituting only obstacles to each other in a bus queue rather than engaging in relations of solidarity, the ‘group in fusion’ spontaneously comes together with a common purpose as in the case of what took place in the Quartier Saint Antoine shortly before the storming of the Bastille. In such moments the shackles of social alienation are cast off and individuals work together in a spirit of solidarity.

The Family Idiot (1970) was to focus more on the ‘progressive’ moment in the dialectic than the Critique, seeking to account for Flaubert as an emanation from his historical context as well as in constant dialectical interaction with it. By this time, Sartre’s existentialist humanist Marxism had come under heavy fire from the structuralists and notably the structuralist Marxists inspired in particular by the work of Althusser. Much of his Marxist writing was produced moreover when his leading contemporary Merleau-Ponty had abandoned the idea of lending active support to Marxism; Merleau-Ponty proceeded to deliver a scathing attack on Sartre’s position in The Adventures of the Dialectic (1974 [1955]). Whatever the merits of these critiques, and of the subsequent decentering of the subject by thinkers who came in one way or another to be associated with post-structuralism (Derrida, and later Badiou for example), Sartre’s ethical humanist outlook and particular subject-historical formulation of the dialectic from 1945 onwards continues to occupy a central place in mid-twentieth century attempts to re-vamp, re-formulate, and add to the conceptual apparatus of classic Marxism.

Bibliography