

NOTE: The following article on Jean-Paul Sartre is part of Raya Dunayevskaya's new work-in-progress, Philosophy and Revolution. Comments on it can be written to her: c/o NEWS & LETTERS, 8751 Grand River Ave., Detroit, Michigan 48204.

-- Editorial Board

#### SARTRE'S SEARCH FOR A METHOD TO UNDERMINE MARXISM

##### I.

In 1957 Sartre had written an essay which he had entitled "Existentialism and Marxism" and published in the Polish journal Twórczość. Later, he tells us, he altered it "considerably so as to adapt it to the needs of French readers" and published it in his own journal, Les Temps Modernes. In 1960 the essay reappeared as the Introduction (111 pages) of his massive (755 pages) Critique de la Raison Dialectique, Volume I, and was entitled Search For A Method\*. In this form it has now been published as a separate book (181 pages).

It is difficult to know what to make out of Search For A Method. In part, and only in part, this is due to the fact that it is Introduction to a work we do not have in English and which has, in any case, not yet been completed. Yet it is no accident that the book under consideration here had undergone three different types of publications before, in its sixth year, it came out at an independent work. Sartre himself felt that it "logically" belonged at the end of the Critique since it comprised the method for which the Critique laid the foundations. As a philosopher, Sartre knows well that methodology is the most concentrated expression of theory, a result of a complex interaction of the spirit of the times, class base, theoretical analysis, practical activity, including a struggle with rival theories, rival praxis, rival methodologies. In a word, to use one that is a favorite with Sartre, it is a "totalization." By this it must be judged.

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\* Search For A Method by Jean-Paul Sartre. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1963)

And, indeed, the difficulty in understanding what Sartre is trying to say is, fundamentally, not related to the book being only an introduction to a work that is only half finished. Rather the difficulty arises from the fact that Search For A Method is weighted down by contradictory statements.

Take the central thesis, that Marxism, and only Marxism, is the philosophy of our age, while Existentialism is only "an ideology", "an enclave inside Marxism." ( p. xxiv) It is stated. Period. The argumentation that follows over the next 181 pages contradicts this either directly or indirectly. For, while Existentialism has, "in general", been demoted to a "parasitic system which lives on the margins of real science", specifically it has moved forward while "Marxism stopped." (p.21) This is supposed to refer, not to the "Marxism of Marx" but to "today's Marxists." Nevertheless, as we shall see, it is not "today's Marxists" Sartre is undermining. "Today's Marxists", a very loose expression at best, becomes, in the hands of Sartre, a cover-all not only of Communists, Trotskyists, ex-Trotskyists, and independent Marxists of all sorts, but of Marx himself insofar as his theory, says Sartre, is only "in its infancy." (p.30)

Nevertheless, this book is of the essence to the new Sartre, the one who proclaims himself a Marxist, properly de-Stalinized ("Stalinized Marxism assumes an air of immobility ..." p.125); properly condescending to "revisionism" ("As for 'revisionism', this is either a truism or an absurdity." p.7); and, in his own eyes, sufficiently de-existentialized: "I consider Marxism the one philosophy of our time which we cannot go beyond." (p. xxiv)

The central core of all of Sartre's criticism of "today's Marxists" rests on the accusation that they have become "dogmatists" who fail to see the particular individual, the given events, the facts, the concrete experience, the new; in a word, reality, and have therefore caused "the temporary arrest of Marxism." (p.89). Since the essay was originally written in 1957 for a Polish periodical, we shall start with the reality of that historic period -- the crushed Hungarian Revolution. It is, moreover, the only current event Sartre deals with; all the rest of the book concerns itself with such pressing realities as the Great French Revolution at the end of the 18th century, literature in general and Flaubert's Madame Bovary in particular, anthropology, microphysics, psychoanalysis, and other analyses by "today's Marxists" -- or else it is on a subject "today's Marxists" have failed to analyze.

#### Sartre's Distorted View of Reality

Sartre rises to ever new heights of indignation against "today's Marxists" who had, before "the second Soviet intervention" (p.23), on November 4, 1956, already made up their minds, thereby displaying their method "in all its nakedness" to be one "which reduces the facts in Hungary to a 'Soviet act of aggression against the democracy of Workers Committees.'" (p.34) Sartre bemoans this fact as well as the fact that, even though news, "a great deal of news" poured forth only afterwards, "I have not heard it said that even one Marxist changed his opinion." (p.23)

Although Sartre himself had opposed the bloody suppression of the Hungarian Revolution by Russian might, at least on the ground that it was "not necessary", nor enhanced the "security of socialism", he here pours forth his indignation,

not against the Russian counter-revolutionaries, but those of "today's Marxists" whose "method in all its nakedness" was used to make a new category of the Workers' Councils as "a democratic institution": "one can even maintain that they bear within them the future of the socialist society," Sartre continued, "But this does not alter the fact that they did not exist in Hungary at the time of the first Soviet intervention; and their appearance during the Insurrection was much too brief and too troubled for us to be able to speak of an ORGANIZED democracy." (p.24, my emphasis, RD)

Because the Workers' Councils were not an organized democracy, neatly packaged for the modern Kierkegaardian of the "unsurpassable opaqueness." (p. 9n), because the spontaneous, self-organization of the Councils had a life that "was much too brief and too troubled", (p.24) this consequence of their forced suppression becomes the sufficient ground for the dramatist Sartre's preference of speaking about the Hungarian Revolution as "the tragedy" rather than the elemental creativity. Sartre wants us, not to build a philosophy of freedom on that reality, on that "unsurpassable singularity of the human adventure", on that unarmed mass facing the armed, organized, state might. We are supposed, instead, to follow Sartre in donning a full suit of administrative armor to cover up Existentialism's distorted view of reality, in all its nakedness.

We have already quoted Sartre's gratuitous remark on "revisionism."<sup>(1)</sup> The myriad of new tendencies -- whether expressed by Hungarian revolutionaries or Polish non-revolutionaries, by intellectuals or workers, by youth newly aspiring to "socialist Humanism", or old Communists like Imre Nagy upon whom freedom fighters suddenly thrust new leadership -- one and all of these living forces, the true human dimension, get head-shrunk into a non-differentiated category, "revisionism", and shrugged off with a "despite their good intentions..." The fact that the operation was not theirs, but that of "Other", their tormentors, Khrushchev and Mao, who have long since transformed Marx's theory of liberation into state-capitalist enslavement does not seem to disturb the philosopher of existence. Though those who fought for freedom from Russian Communist overlordship were the real "existents" in the Poland of 1957 whom Sartre was addressing, the philosopher of "the individual" didn't take time out to personalize a single one -- unless the questionable choice of that time and that place for launching an attack on the only truly original Communist philosopher who finally got swept up by the revolution in his native land -- George Lukacs -- can be called "personalization": "It is not by chance that Lukacs -- Lukacs who so often violates history -- has found in 1956 the best definition of this frozen Marxism." (p.28)

Now it would be easy, all too easy to discount Sartre as a mere fallow-traveler. We would then, however, miss the main point: the compulsion for Sartre's first return to philosophy since the publication of Being and Nothingness twenty years ago. The totality of the crisis, on the one hand, and the uncompromising stands of the Freedom NOW movement, on the other hand, demand that we face reality not one-sidedly but philosophically, as a way of life and as a comprehensive view.

As Sartre Sees Himself Now, and As He Is

First, it must be stated that Sartre's "Question de methode" (wrongly translated<sup>(2)</sup> as Search For A Method) is not a search for, but a pronouncement of, a method. Sartre expects the whole world to sit up and listen because our age

"demands a new rationality. Because nobody has been willing to establish this rationality within experience, I state as a fact". — Sartre loudly proclaims — "absolutely no one, either in the East or in the West, writes or speaks a sentence or a word about us and our contemporaries that is not gross error." (p.111)

Sartre's declaration that "nobody ...absolutely no one" knows how to utter anything that is not "gross error" directs its sharpest arrows against "today's Marxists." Not only does the Marxism of Marx, however, remain, supposedly, inviolate, but the rarity of "the periods of philosophical creation are rare" is stressed: "Between the seventeenth century and the twentieth, I see three such periods, which I would designate by the names of the men who dominated them: there is the 'moment' of Descartes and Locke, that of Kant and Hegel, finally that of Marx." (p.7) As against the creative philosophy of Marx, which remains valid for our day, Existentialism, says the founder of French existentialism, "is a parasitical system living on the margin of Knowledge, which at first it opposed but into which today it seeks to be integrated." (p.8) The very last words of the book reiterate this thesis: "The comments which we have made in the course of the present essay are directed — to the modest limit of our capabilities — towards hastening the moment of that dissolution." (p.181)

Despite this most categorical statement, Sartre fails to act out his commitment. It remains altogether unclear, for example, why he doesn't do what "today's Marxists" seem incapable of doing. Instead of rising to the challenge to resuscitate Marxism in its original state, Sartre not only holds on to the autonomy of French existentialism but also parades proudly its origins in Kierkegaard. This, despite the fact that Sartre attributes the reappearance of "the Dane", at the beginning of the 20th century, to the fact that it was a time "when people will take it into their heads to fight against Marxism by opposing to it pluralisms, ambiguities, paradoxes ..." (p.15)

Nor does Sartre flinch from using himself as an example of Marx's dictum, that the ruling ideas of any epoch are the ideas of the ruling class. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that what the students of his day did to oppose "the sweet dreams of our professors" was to become proponents of "violence": "It was a wretched violence (insults, brawls, suicides, murders, irreparable catastrophes) which risked leading us to fascism ..." (p.20) The war, however, "shattered the worn structures of our thought" and they "discovered the world." (p.21) They were then "convinced at one and the same time that historical materialism furnished the only valid interpretation of history and that existentialism remained the only concrete approach to reality." (p.21) Though the contradiction in this attitude is now so apparent to him that he wants existentialism "to be integrated into Marxism", Sartre takes considerable time out to show how "Marxism, after drawing us to it as the moon draws the tides ... abruptly left us stranded, Marxism stopped." (p.21)

Again, the reference to Marxism is supposed to be the Marxism of "today's Marxists", "lazy Marxism". Again, Sartre gives no reply to the obvious question, why didn't the existentialists "totalize" their experiences and integrate them into "the whole." If we are to find out why, we will have to do our own digging. It is necessary to begin our journey downward into Sartreist ideology by making sure that we do not allow his general oath of allegiance to Marxism to

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blind us toward the profusion of his specific departures from "dogmas", that is to say, the heart and soul, sinews and bones of Marxism.

Somewhere D. H. Lawrence wrote: "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale." (3) A careful reading of Sartre's book will reveal quite a tale as to why Sartre didn't, and couldn't, restate the Marxism of Marx for our age.

Marx's Theory of Knowledge and the Fetishism of Commodities

Although Sartre always capitalizes Knowledge when he is referring to Marx's philosophy to signify that this is "the whole", in which Existentialism is but an "enclave", Sartre, in a footnote (pp.32-3), states that "the theory of knowledge continues to be the weak point in Marxism." Sartre draws this conclusion after he has quoted one sentence from Marx on the materialist conception of history, and one from Lenin on consciousness as "reflection of being", after which Sartre remarks triumphantly: "In both cases it is a matter of suppressing subjectivity; with Marx, we are placed beyond it; with Lenin on this side of it." (p.32n) That this baseless generalization flies in the face both of all Marx wrote and all Marx did does not deter Sartre. He stubbornly maintains that the sentence he quoted from Marx -- that "The materialist conception of the world signifies simply the conception of nature as it is without any foreign addition." -- amounts to nothing less horrific than this: "Having stripped away all subjectivity and having assimilated himself into pure objective truth, he (Marx) walks in a world of objects inhabited by object-men." (p.32n)

And, one again: "Both (the reference is again to the single quotation from Marx and the half of one sentence from Lenin) of these conceptions amount to breaking man's real relation with history, since in the first, knowing is pure theory, a non-situated observing, and in the second, it is a simple passivity." (p.32n) These straw ideas that Sartre has just strung up and attributed to Marx and Lenin he labels "anti-dialectical", and "pro-Marxist" (p.33n, emphasis is Sartre's). He notes condescendingly that "in Marx's remarks on the practical aspects of truth and on the general relations of theory and praxis, it would be easy to discover the rudiments of a realistic epistemology which has never been developed." (p.33n) Previously he had assured us that the "sclerosis" in Marxism did "not correspond to normal aging ... Far from being exhausted, Marxism is still very young, almost in its infancy; it has scarcely begun to develop." Despite the fact that Sartre has proclaimed Marxism to be "the one philosophy of our time," and despite the fact that it will, quite obviously, take a Sartre to develop the "rudiments" for an epistemology in Marxism, Sartre considers his whole work, even after the infusion of Existentialism into Marxism to be "a prolegomena" to any future anthropology. We, however, must follow the logic here as he leaves Chapter I, entitled, "Marxism and Existentialism."

By the second chapter, "The Problem of Mediations and Auxiliary Disciplines," Sartre will stump -- and this time not only in footnotes but directly within his main text -- where angels, at least knowledgeable ones, would fear to tread -- the domain of one of Marx's most original discoveries -- the fantastic form of the appearance of production relations among men as exchange of things: the fetishism of commodities.

Here is what Sartre writes: "The theory of fetishism, outlined by Marx, has never been developed; furthermore, it could not be extended to cover all social realities. Thus Marxism, while rejecting organicism, lacks weapons against it. Marxism considers the market a thing and holds that its inexorable laws contribute to reifying the relations among men. But when suddenly -- to use Henri Lefebvre's (a "today's Marxist rd) terms -- a dialectical conjuring trick shows us this monstrous abstraction as the veritable concrete...then we believe

that we are returned to Hegelian idealism." (p.77)

One would be hard put to match the number of errors Sartre succeeds in squeezing into less than four sentences. Judged by them, Marx has wasted the arduous labor he put into the creation of the three volumes of CAPITAL, which aims at establishing that both the pivot of his theory, as well as the actuality, of capitalism is not to be found in the market -- the favorite hunting ground of utopians, underconsumptionists and capitalistic buyers of labor power -- but it is to be found in the process of production, and only there.

But, first, it is necessary to deal with attitudes rather than content. For the moment, therefore, we'll set aside its vast accumulation of errors, and consider only the superficiality of Sartre's approach. Contrast it to Marx's attitude that, despite a quarter of a century of labor that went into the completion of CAPITAL, led him to introduce some fundamental revisions in the second edition of his work, and precisely on the two points raised by Sartre: the fetishism of commodities and the inexorable laws of capitalist development which go to make up its "law of motion." Between the first edition of Volume I, in 1867, and the second edition, in 1872, nothing less historic occurred than the Paris Commune. This brought about, "at one and the same time" -- a favorite phrase of Sartre's whenever he is about to force a unity between two irreconcilable opposites, but which we use purely factually -- Marx's profound historical work, The Civil War in France, and a new edition of his greatest theoretical work.

In Civil War in France Marx elaborated a new theory of a workers' state, rooted in the reality that the Parisians had "stormed the heavens" and "at last discovered the political form in which to work out labor's economic emancipation." The new form of human relations established during the Commune -- though its existence too had been "too brief and too troubled" -- had so illuminated Marx's conception of the whole question of "the form of value", i.e., the fetishism of commodities, as well as the "inevitable" collapse of capitalism, that he decided to make fundamental additions to CAPITAL. These he considered of such great significance that he asked those who had already read the work, to read the new edition since it contained "a scientific value independent of the original." In the Afterword to the French edition, he calls attention to the fact that he changed the section dealing with fetishism "in a significant manner." We assume Sartre has this edition since it is the standard one and we hope he also has an 1867 edition. A comparison of the two will show that, where in 1867, Marx laid the main emphasis on the form of value giving the relations of men in production the fantastic appearance of a relation of things, in the 1872 edition Marx shifts the emphasis to the necessity of that form of appearance because that is, in truth, what relations of people are at the point of production: "material relations between persons and social relations between things." (4)

This, by no means, completes the history and significance of the changes Marx introduced into the French editions, changes which included, in an expansion of those "inexorable laws" of capitalist production, a prediction about the ultimate form of centralization of capital which we today call state-capitalism. (5) Here, however, we must limit ourselves to the relationship of the question of fetishism to the personalities Sartre chose to attack in that footnote on "subjectivity." The only one, besides Marx, who was singled out for attack was Lenin. Now it happens that, while Lenin wrote many profound economic studies of capitalism's "inexorable laws", both in theory and in the Russian actuality, his

philosophic works were quite superficial, and with the 1908 major study — Materialism and Empirio-Criticism — he gave the green light to vulgar materialism. This is the one Stalinists, Khrushchevites, Maoists, and fellow-travellers base themselves on.

No serious student of Marxism, especially not a philosopher, has any right to disregard the break in Lenin's philosophic thought at the time of the collapse of the Second International. For it is this fact, at the outbreak of World War I, which led Lenin to reread Hegel and reconstitute his own very method of thought. It is then, and only then, that he began fully to appreciate the inseparability of Hegelian philosophy from Marxian philosophic and economic categories. As Lenin himself expressed it in his new (1915) PHILOSOPHIC NOTEBOOKS: "Aphorism: It is impossible fully to grasp Marx's Capital, and especially its first chapter, if you have not studied through and understood the whole of Hegel's Logic. Consequently, none of the Marxists for the past 1/2 century have understood Marx!!"

That Lenin included himself among the Marxists who had not fully grasped CAPITAL, "especially its first chapter", which includes the section on fetishisms, is, however, in this instance, not half as important as the continuous stress he put on the theory of knowledge, and the role of practice in the theory of knowledge, both in Hegel and in Marx. It led Lenin to this phenomenal conclusion: "Alias: Man's cognition not only reflects the objective world, but creates it." For some one in 1963 (or 1960, if you wish to consider only the French publication date) to write as if, to Lenin, consciousness was only the reflection of being "at best an approximately accurate reflection" and on the basis of that half sentence run, helter-skelter, to the wild conclusion that "by a single stroke he (Lenin) removes from himself the right to write what he is writing" (p. 32n) speaks very poorly indeed for Sartre's "comprehensive" method, not to mention his scholarship.

Now then, to return to the content of those four sentences by Sartre from page 77 which contended that it was "a dialectical conjuring trick" to consider "this monstrous abstraction" — reification of the relations of men — to be "the veritable concrete." First, let us note that Sartre is standing Marx on his head when he continues blithely to talk of the market's inexorable laws where Marx demonstrated the inexorable laws to arise out of production. They are, of course, manifested in the market, but they cannot (can not) be controverted any place but in production, and only by human beings, specifically the laborers, who had been transformed into appendages of machines but whose "quest for universality" had given birth to "new passions", thus making them the forces for the overthrow of capitalism. The market, no doubt, contributes something to the mystification of human relations since the only things that relates men in the market place is money. But that was not Marx's point.

On the contrary, Marx insisted that in order to understand what is taking place in the market it is necessary to leave it and go into the factory. It is there that relations among men get "reified", made into things. It is there, at that "process of suction"<sup>(6)</sup>, that capital grows monstrous big, but, far from being an "abstraction", is the "veritable concrete" which "sucks dry living labor", and makes it into a thing. Far from this being the result of "a dialectical conjuring trick", it is the literal truth of relations of men at the point



of production. The "inexorable laws" that arise out of this, out of this and not out of the market, make inevitable the collapse of the type of insane productive system that makes man into a thing.

Marx states and restates all this in a thousand different ways, in thousands of places throughout all his works -- philosophic, economic, historic, and even in the analysis of the relations of works of art to the specificity of history. Marxist theoretical battlefields are strewn with the bones of those, including the martyred revolutionary, Rosa Luxemburg, who thought that this talk of labor as capital was not reality, but only a matter of "language." Marx, on the contrary, states over and over and over again, that unless one grasps this, just this, there is nothing to distinguish "scientific" from utopian socialism, proletarian democracy from "a workers' dictator like Lassalle", or the new (Marx's) humanism, which unites materialism and idealism, from both the vulgar materialism of "vulgar communism" and the de-humanized bourgeois (Hegelian) idealism, which, despite the revolutionary dialectic, had to lapse back into a vulgar idealization of the Prussian bureaucracy. "Thus," concluded also the young Marx, "nothing need be said of Hegel's adaptation to religion, the state, etc. for this lie is the lie of his principle."

And thus also, the chapter in Sartre's book which is supposed to be a plea "to reconquer man within Marxism" (p.83), ends, instead, with a plea for integration of intellectual disciplines -- and from "the West" at that! "We have shown that dialectical materialism is reduced to its own skeleton if it does not integrate into itself certain Western disciplines," concludes Sartre. "Our examples have revealed at the heart of this philosophy a lack of any concrete anthropology .... The default of Marxism has led us to attempt this integration ourselves ... according to principles which give our ideology its unique character, principles which we are now going to set forth." (pp. 83-4)

### III.

#### The Dominant Dogmatism of Sartre

It has taken Sartre some 17 years to return to the field of philosophy. No matter what one thought of BEING AND NOTHINGNESS -- and this writer considers it a manifestation of the disintegration of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois thought under the blows of Depression, Fascism, and the Fall of France -- the book was a carefully elaborated, closely argued work. This is not true of Search For A Method. Where not totally wrong, its argumentation is perfunctory. It jumps all over vast fields of thought -- from philosophy to science, from literature to anthropology, from economics to psychoanalysis, from analyses of revolutions to those of the Proletariat (the capital P is Sartre's), and from history to the time of day. But it lands nowhere.

Its rootlessness leaves a deep gap in the book, which is not due to the fact that we have not seen the whole work. Rather it is of the essence to the whole work. The abyss opened up here (Search For A Method) will be the more glaring in CRITIQUE DE LA RAISON DIALECTIQUE, Vol. I. Let's follow the indications in the work we're reviewing. "Sade's pessimism," writes the uniquely equipped dramatist Sartre, "joins that of the manual laborer, to whom the bourgeois revolution gave nothing, and who perceived at about 1794 that he was excluded from the 'universal' class." (p.117)

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Now, Sade's pessimism "joined" that of the manual laborer neither in theory, nor in life; neither in the specificity of the act, nor in the given situation. Nowhere, in fact, except in the head of the Existentialist Sartre could "the lived hope of a noble, outlawed by his class" (p. 116) "join" that of the manual laborer who by the very fact of being "excluded from the 'universal' class", would gain that "quest for true universality" which would lead him, not to sadism, but to revolution.

All that Sartre reveals by intellectually forcing the unification of the irreconcilables is that he is a true son of bourgeois society dominated by the dogmatism of the concept of the backwardness of the masses who are supposed to be incapable of thinking on their own, and therefore must be managed, led, and made to work the harder and produce the more. By his insistence on the particular against the general, the concrete — "incident by incident" — as against the "abstract ideology of universality", the historic event against the a priori judgment, "absolute empiricism" as against dogmatism, Sartre may have destroyed as many dogmatisms as he claims. But one, unstated, yet all-pervading dogmatism continues to be the underlying motif of all Sartre thinks, writes, does. It is the dogmatism of the backwardness of the masses.

Sartre seems to revel in "revealing" that the Proletariat is not "an abstract ideology of universality", but a concrete separateness: "There is more than one Proletariat, simply because there are national groups which have developed differently." (p.89) Or Sartre will ask rhetorically: "Wasn't Thermidor rendered possible by the growing dissension between the sans-culottes and controlling faction of the members of the Convention?" (pp.120-1) And then the shocking conclusion: "It is true that the people supported the Revolution and true, too, that their distress had counter-revolutionary tendencies." (p.121)

He sees "counter-revolutionary tendencies" everywhere — except, of course, in himself, and in the Communist Party, which even when it perpetrates actual counter-revolutionary acts, continues to remain "the only revolutionary Party." He held such a position during the Resistance, where, as against the Communist Party which knows where it is going, he holds that the non-Communist Resisters had but one theme: "We are fighting the Germans, but this does not give us any right over the period which will follow the War." (7) He held such a position after Liberation, as the quotation from his 1946 writings testifies to his misconception of the CP as "the only revolutionary party." (8) Ten years later, during the actual Communist suppression of the Hungarian Revolution, Sartre's opposition is restrained by thoughts of "the security of socialism" (sic!). On the other hand, although the most exciting page in the history of the late 1950's and early 1960's is that written by the African revolutions that, in less than a decade, literally reshaped the map of the world, the philosopher of existence writes that "societies of repetition" are "without history" (sic!) Since no reactionary could have uttered a more condescending lie — and Sartre is a "progressive" who strongly opposes colonialism — here is how he tried to extricate himself by inventing a distinction between historicity and "living historically": "Man should not be defined by historicity — since there are some societies without history — but by the permanent possibility of living historically the breakdowns which sometimes overthrow societies of repetition." (p. 167n)

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Here we see the results of Sartre's "comprehensive", "Progressive-Regressive Method." It is time we turned to the method itself and its underlying theory.

IV.

"The Progressive-Regressive Method" and the Theory of Scarcity

"The Marxist method is progressive because it is the result — in the work of Marx himself — of long analyses," writes Sartre. "Today synthetic progression is dangerous ... Our method is heuristic; it teaches us something new because it is at once both regressive and progressive." (p.133)

For a comprehension of this method we must comprehend the theory it expounds. We must, therefore, first retrace our steps to the section on "Marxism and Existentialism", at the point where Sartre first introduces to his "new" theory, the outworn, pre-Marxist "theory of scarcity." (9) The sentence followed the one which said he supported "unreservedly" Marx's thesis, that "The mode of production of material life generally dominated the development of social, political, and intellectual life." Straightaway after this "unreserved" approval, however, Sartre wrote: "But Marx's statement seems to me to point to a factual evidence which we cannot go beyond so long as the transformation of social relations and technical progress have not freed man from the yoke of scarcity." (p.34) Sartre follows with still another quotation from Marx about the "reign of freedom ... beyond the sphere of material production proper", after which Sartre concludes: "As soon as there will exist for everyone a margin of real freedom beyond the production of life, Marxism will have lived out its span; a philosophy of freedom will take its place. But we have no means, no intellectual instrument, no concrete experience which allows us to conceive of this freedom or of this philosophy." (p.34)

On a first reading, this appears to be a restatement of Marx's contention that we who are living pre-historically, that is to say in a class society, cannot write a blueprint for a class-less society. Since, however, Marxism is a theory of liberation, Sartre's shocking phrasing, "a philosophy of freedom will take its (Marxism's) place" compels a rereading of the Sartrean interpretation, alongside the full passage from Marx who defined the reign of freedom as "that development of human power which is its own end, the true realm of freedom which, however, can flourish only on the realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working day is its fundamental premise." (10)

Failing to perceive alienations as manifestations of class contradictions, Sartre stands everything on its head and has alienations "give birth" to these contradictions: "In a socialist society, at a certain moment in its development, the worker is alienated from his production ..." (p.178) "...the new alienations which give birth to the contradictions of socialist society and which reveal to it its abandonment; that is, the incommensurability of existence and practical knowledge." (p.179)

Since, to a philosopher, an "alienated existence" is an analytical phrase rather than an exploitative reality, it becomes easy for him to think that introducing another idea, such as the notion of "future", therefore means the

achievement of a "synthetic transcendence" rather than the giving up of the today for the tomorrow. Thus, Sartre writes glibly: "For the man in China the future is more true than the present." (p. 97) And how can the existentialist jargon about "the incommensurability of existence and practical knowledge" compensate "the man in China" for "Its (socialist society's) abandonment"?

Why is this master of language so slippery, ambivalent, contradictory, confusing on the warp and woof of Hegelian and Marxian philosophy -- the theory of alienation -- where he should, as "a philosopher of existence" get along so swimmingly? The Humanism of Marxism is grounded on this theory. Here Marxism transcended Hegelian dialectics, stood Hegel "right side up", and at the same time separated itself from what Marx called "quite vulgar and unthinking communism" which was "only the logical expression of private property" and "completely negates the personality of man." (5)

As against Marx's concept of any property form, including communal, being "the logical expression of private property", Sartre not only makes this the specifica differentia between capitalism and socialism, but is himself so much the prisoner of his theory that he extends it to "going beyond a situation": "For us man is characterized above all by his going beyond a situation, and by what he succeeds in making of what he has been made -- even if he never recognizes himself in his objectification. This going beyond we find at the very root of the human -- in need. It is need which, for example, links the scarcity of women in the Marquesas, as a structural fact of the group...." (p.91)

No doubt for the author of Being and Nothingness who rooted man in desire, anguish, dread, finding "the root of the human -- in need" is new. But this, too, was long ago answered even by the young Marx who took psychology to task for this, just this: "What should we think of a science (psychology) where such an extensive realm of human activity (labor) says no more to it than what can be said in one word: 'Need, common need!'" And his answer was this: "Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that any kind of object is ours only when we have it, i.e. when it exists for us as capital, or when we possess it directly -- eat it, drink it, wear it, live in it, etc. -- in short use it ... in place of all the physical senses, there is the sense of possession, which is the simple alienation of all the e senses. To such absolute poverty has human essence had to be reduced in order to give birth to its inner wealth!"

Since, however, Sartre conceived of "need, common need" as the root both of capitalist and socialist society, he moves away from fundamentals to the epiphenomena: "Exploiter and exploited are men in conflict in a system whose principal character is scarcity. To be sure, the capitalist owns the instruments of labor, and the worker does not own them: there we have a pure contradiction. (11) But to be precise, this contradiction never succeeds in accounting for each event." (p. 127) "Whatever men and events are, they certainly appear within the compass of scarcity ..." (p.132). "The object of existentialism -- due to the default of the Marxists -- is the particular man in the social field, in his class, in an environment of collective objects and other particular men .... Lazy Marxists make use of it (synthetic progression) to constitute the real, a priori ... They can discover nothing by this method of pure exposition ... Our method is heuristic ..." (p.133) "This means that it will attempt to clarify the givens of Marxist Knowledge by indirect knowing (that is, as we have seen, by words which regressively denote existential structures) ..." (p.161) "Furthermore, in order for notions like reification and alienation to assume their full meaning, it would have been

necessary for the questioner and the questioned to be made one ... But before Marxism, itself a product of the social conflict, could turn to these problems it had to assume fully its role as a practical philosophy -- that is, as a theory clarifying social and political praxis. The result is a profound lack within contemporary Marxism." (p. 177)

The solution? "That the Marxists allow themselves to be duped by mechanical materialism is inexcusable," writes Sartre, "since they know and approve of large-scale socialist planning." (p.97) Just as Smith and Ricardo, despite their discovery of labor as the source of value, became prisoners of "the fetishism of commodities" because they could not see capitalism as anything but a "natural order", nor labor not only as "source" but as "subject", and there met their historic barrier, so Sartre met his in the State Plan. And, as Smith and Ricardo tried explaining away labor alienation as a "feudal blamish", so Sartre seeks to explain away labor alienations under "socialism" by his "theory" of scarcity -- scarcity in this over-productive, state-capitalist, automated, "microphysic," atomic age of ours! It may not be much of a theory to explain the ills of capitalism in the United States or Western Europe or even Japan. But, obviously, when he first dragged in the "yoke of scarcity" (p.34) in talking of Marx's analysis of the reign of freedom and claiming that "we have no means, no intellectual instrument, no concrete experience which allows to conceive of this freedom or of this philosophy", Sartre was thinking of "socialist societies." Before therefore we jump to the conclusion that Sartre's new theory of scarcity reveals more a scarcity of thought than a material scarcity, let's remember that new reality which did not confront Marx, the state-capitalist societies of Russia and China which he calls socialist. Consciously or unconsciously, it is for these he created the theory of scarcity. No wonder then that the Communist theoreticians, who are too well acquainted with Marx's writings and their own claims to a society superior to capitalism, societies of scarcity prior to the Industrial Revolution, to do anything but laugh at his theory, remind us that "there is another" Sartre, one who "leans towards socialism in his practical activities." (1)

One need not agree with the view of the translator and enthusiastic admirer of Sartre, Hazel E. Barnes, that, with the publication of Being and Nothingness, "Sartre was recognized as the proponent of the most radical view of human freedom to appear since the Epicureans." (p.vii) It is obvious enough that this writer holds no such view. But it was at least true that, despite the fact that a beatnik existentialism seized the slogan-like statements of Sartrean philosophy -- There is no moral law. Man is a useless passion. Life is meaningless. The world is a nauseating mess. Hell is other people --, to Sartre these emerged only after arduously working out his philosophic categories of Being-for-itself (man's consciousness) and Being-in-itself (the objects of conscious, or non-conscious reality) in order to see if the individual could be free. In a sort of purgatory, created by the "Nothingness", the void between consciousness and the objects it was conscious of, the struggle between the "for-itself" and "in-itself" were first to confront the true "No Exit" in the "for-Other", that is to say, relations with other human beings.

Now it is true that Sartre's pervading pessimism and deep cynicism led him to conclude, to use his own expression, that "respect for the Other's freedom is an empty word." (12) And no doubt George Gurvitch has a strong point when he says that the philosophic categories Sartre created are "bereft of con-

sequences and a sense of history." (13) Surely, Sartre's theory of human relations that are bound hand and foot and confined to but two "fundamental attitudes" — the equally deplorable extremes of masochism and sadism — can lead to nothing but anguish, loneliness, frustration in a sort of an infinite regress. But it is also true that this fantastic and totally false theory of human relations is in conflict with Sartre's other theory, that of individual freedom. (14) Indeed, by the end of Being and Nothingness the conflict has reached so impossible an impasse that Sartre himself attempts to force an exit, or point to one in a footnote (p.412) at least: "These considerations (the attitudes tending toward masochism and sadism) do not exclude the possibility of an ethics of deliverance and salvation. But this can be achieved only after a radical conversion which we cannot discuss here."

It was, no doubt, symbolic of the vent that the Resistance created for itself as Being and Nothingness went to press in Nazi-occupied France. Surely Sartre, as an individual, tried the Kantian, moral way out in the period after liberation, even tried, in some instances to oppose both capitalism and communism, although even in his best independent days, he was all too ready, as we saw, to throw a halo around the "Communist Party is the only revolutionary party." However, whatever it is that Sartre, the committed intellectual who presently claims to be an adherent of Marxism, believes in and bases his activities on, Sartre, the Existential philosopher is following a straight line of "inspiration" from defeats and only defeats. Just as, in the 1930's, it was neither the sit-down strikes in France which destroyed the pretensions of fascism in his native land, nor the Spanish Revolution in the other Europe, but rather the proletarian defeats by German and Spanish fascism that set the mood for Being and Nothingness, so it is that, in the 1950's, it is neither the Hungarian Revolution from Communist totalitarianism nor the African Revolutions from Western imperialism that set the mood. Rather it is the victories of the counter-revolutions that set the mood for Search For A Method and the Critique of Dialectical Reason.

In any case, in his return to strictly philosophic works, we got, not the promised "Ethics", but the work at hand which simply escapes from resolving the conflict between his theory of individual freedom and his theory of human relations by shifting from man the individual to man in the mass. Here "Hell is other people" becomes "Hell is the practico-inerte." In a word, the division between the "passive" masses and the "active" elite which has stood capitalist production and its philosophy of rationalism so well from its beginnings to its state-capitalist stage is given a new coat of philosophic paint. This is the remorseless logic of the failure of seeing creativity in the proletariat.

In his Critique Sartre states that his new work could not have been written if the free air created by De Stalinization had not taken place. We can only guess what will happen when the Khrushchev-Mao conflict reaches total rupture. What casts a better illumination on the compulsions for the work is this: the very intellectuals who were blind to the "new roads to socialism" that were opened up in life by the June 17, 1953 East German Revolt, which first put an end to the myth of Stalinist invincibility, were the ones who rose to the debate once Khrushchev had given the green light in February 1956. They are also the ones who recoiled when the Hungarian Revolution in October 1956 showed that DeStalinization and "polycentrism" were neither merely academic debates nor limited to ending "the

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cult of personality", but were questions of life and death. The retreat lead to the elaboration of a rather meaningless "Progressive-Regressive Method" which seeks nevertheless to undermine Marxism through infusion into it not only of Existentialism but also totalitarian Communism.

The anti-Stalinist, anti-capitalist, contemporary petty-bourgeois intellectual, himself the victim of the absolute division between mental and manual labor, the climax of centuries of division between philosophers and workers, is all too ready to hand over the revolutionary role of their self-emancipation into the hands of the Communist Party and its philosophy of the elite who will continue "to lead" the workers while the latter must continue to labor as before, only harder. In the Critique Sartre creates a veritable mystique about the "political group" which fights the "inertia" of the masses; he even glorifies terror: "The communal freedom creates itself as Terror."

...he methodological foundation for the new Communist metaphysic has been laid by Sartre here in Search For A Method.

Detroit, Michigan  
September, 1963

--- Raya Dunayevskaya

#### Footnotes

(1) Due appreciation for this is tendered Sartre by no less a personality than the chief philosopher for Polish Communism: "Sartre's ideas on revisionism are of interest. The term is, he says, either a truism or an absurdity." (p.37) "This thought of Sartre's goes far beyond the shallow but loud propaganda of the revisionist miracle-makers, and, in my opinion, deserves a deeper analysis. So we see that Sartre not only avows Marxist philosophy but attempts to defend it from attack." (p.38) (Adam Schaff, A Philosophy of Man, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1963, \$3.25)

(2) While the imprecise translation of the title is due to poetic analysis rather than to any lack of knowledge of the French language or the Sartrean philosophy, it is also true that Miss Barnes is unacquainted with the Marxist terminology and translates such famous concepts as "the fetishisms of commodities" as "the fetishism of merchandise." I have therefore disregarded her translation of passages in Marx that Sartre quotes and used, instead, either the standard English translation or, in the case of the Early Essays of Marx, my own translation.

(3) Studies in Classic American Literature

(4) CAPITAL, Vol.I, p.84. (Chicago, Charles H. Kerr and Co.)

(5) The analysis I made of state-capitalism -- and it was the first ever made from original Russian sources of the Five Year Plans -- appears in my MARXISM AND FREEDOM, which includes, as Appendices, Marx's Early Economic-Philosophic Essays 1844. It is this translation which I use in all passages cited above from the young Marx.

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- (6) In the Russian edition only of the Archives of Marx and Engels, Vol. II (VII) p.69. This is from the chapter that was originally (in manuscript form) to have been the ending of CAPITAL, Volume I.
- (7) Sartre par lui-même by F. Jeanson, quoted by M. Cranston's Jean-Paul Sartre, p. 38.
- (8) "Materialisme et revolution" (Les Temps Modernes: Vol. I, Nos 9 and 10, June-July, 1946) In 1947 the old periodical, Politics, translated this essay on "Materialism and Revolution". It reappeared as Chapter 13 of Sartre's Literary and Philosophical Essays (New York, Criterion Books, Inc.) in 1955. This edition bears a footnote by Sartre, which reads: "As I have been unfairly reproached with not quoting Marx in this article, I should like to point that my criticisms are not directed against him, but against Marxist scholasticism of 1949. Or, if you prefer, against Marx through Neo-Stalinist Marxism." The truth, however, is that the article couldn't have referred to "the Marxist scholasticism" of 1949 since it was written in 1946. Nor could it have been directed against "Neo-Stalinist Marxism" which did not arise until after Stalin's death. Sartre, at the time of writing his original article in 1946, (which duly quoted Stalin as an authority on Marxism) was such a millenium away from thinking about "Neo-Stalinist Marxism" that the chief target of his was — Frederick Engels. Instead of being then wrought up about "Neo-Stalinism" which was yet to appear historically, he couldn't find it in himself to resist footnoting even the favorable mention of Marx's Humanism as follows: "It is, once again, Marx's point of view in 1844, that is, until the unfortunate meeting with Engels". It is one of the marks of our state-capitalist age that our intellectuals seem more adept at re-writing history, than at writing it.
- (9) It needs no Marx to answer this excuse for class exploitation. The "scarcity theory" — basis of primitive societies — and the "buying cheap and selling dear" idea of pre-Industrial Revolution societies were answered by classical (bourgeois) political economy of Smith and Ricardo. The Marxian theory of surplus value, which said Marx, was really implicit in the Smith-Ricardo theory of value, is based on the assumption and the fact that the technological revolution put an end to any "theory" of scarcity as an excuse for the maldistribution of income or the cause of crisis.
- (10) CAPITAL, Volume III, pp. 954-5
- (11) The very first sentence of Marx's Private Property and Communism states: "... But the opposition between the lack of property and property is still an undifferentiated opposition ... So long as it is not conceived as the opposition between labor and capital it is not yet a contradiction."
- (12) Being and Nothingness, p. 409
- (13) It is part of the discussion appended to A Short History of Existentialism by Jean Wahl (N.Y. The Philosophical Library) p.39.
- (14) For a rather fine analysis of this point and other of Sartre's books, see Jean-Paul Sartre by M. Cranston (N.Y., Grove Press, Inc. Evergreen Pilot Books, 95¢)