

What do Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir Have to Say to Us Today?

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The question ‘What do Sartre and Beauvoir have to say to us today?’, asked for the anniversary of a famous lecture at Unesco, might raise many objections to each element which would stand in the way of an instant response. But philosophical reservations should not be a pretext for avoiding it: so if a response is required, one is tempted ‘today’ to record that they do not tell us very much, because they perhaps belong to another world, essentially determined by the Second World War. It is thus dangerous to pick out a contemporary truth unless we believe in eternal verities, but then ‘today’ would no longer be relevant.

If we want to apprehend Sartre’s thought and practice we cannot separate it, right up to the end of his life, from that experience of war. In his self-portrait at 70 he said ‘The war split my life in two. Before it I was into libertarian individualism and then I moved on to revolutionary marxism.’ Before the war Sartre conceived of freedom as a sort of independence from all family ties, social constraints, marital and political bonds, and he held a philosophical nihilist position, like so many other contemporaries. The decisive experience for him was mobilization, internment, and the encounter with the group in a Stalag. At that moment he discovered theatre, speaking to the group: the idea that he had to address what he had to say to the collectivity and not write thinking of an indeterminate audience. In his lecture ‘The writer’s responsibility’, whose 60th anniversary we are celebrating, Sartre states peremptorily and by way of expiation:

What we writers have to avoid is letting our responsibility turn into culpability, if in 50 years’ time it could be said that they saw the greatest world catastrophe on the way and remained silent.

The audience targeted can only subscribe to that notion of responsibility, but we cannot avoid thinking that the argument has behind it a self-criticism: like the major-

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ity of intellectuals Sartre stayed on the sidelines of the political upheavals of the 1930s. We only have to read his writings and know that he was in Berlin when Nazism was on the rise but did not take in what was happening.

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The stress on the writer's responsibility therefore has a twofold ring, as a moral call and a personal regret, a way of saying 'never again' about the inhumanity, but also 'never again' about the detachment of the philosopher who goes to study Husserl without realizing what is going on in the street. Sartre did not see anything coming, like nearly everyone (others such as Aron or Levinas were more aware), and in a way he made it into a 'novel': he turned that absence, that negligence into fiction. He wrote *Les Chemins de la liberté*, a fictional series tracing the itinerary of a character, Mathieu Delarue, who believes in a freedom of independence and who, carried along by History, discovers the emptiness of that freedom. Sartre conceives that novel of self-discovery as a farewell and a direction (which led him to abandon the novel form itself in favour of the theatre). His political activism took shape based on that sentence from the lecture given at Unesco, the idea that it is necessary to avoid culpability and therefore to be present in all the situations where the human is being attacked, humiliated, tracked down. In a way we can say that Sartre's conversion – and it is indeed a conversion – is a twofold one: on the one hand the transition from individualism to engagement with the collective and on the other the pledge to write on the basis of a moral and political wager. Not only standing as a witness to inhuman situations but also, and at the same time, gambling on the future based on the unbearable indignity of subhumans.

Emerging from the war, Sartre formed this idea, this conviction, this hope: the human comes forth out of the subhuman. The elementary morality he attempted to formulate cannot be summarized in any group of humanist values from which we can denounce the conditions forced on human beings by human beings. A dozen years later, in accordance with that moral demand, he evolved an anthropology of action that discovered in revolt or survival a requirement which founds and restores the human. Morality comes from a reaction to the impossible when, faced with unacceptable and inhuman treatment, this affirmation becomes imperative: it is impossible to deny the human. In this way morality 'invents itself' rather than being predetermined by a set of principles. In 1945 this theory was still only an intuition felt in revolt and remorse, and informing his statements on committed literature: a literature that gambles on the possibility of a rebirth of the human being. Thus Sartre's humanism is complex, swinging from nihilist anti-humanism (which moralists criticized him for) to the recreation of a human subject (which structuralists criticized him for). On one hand *L'Être et le néant* (1943) and the human consciousness whose freedom is based on annihilation, on the other the lecture 'L'existentialisme est un humanisme' (1945), a morality of action for the free human. That humanism does not presuppose either God or human nature. It is a negative humanism: negative because it starts from everything a human is not, humanism because it has hope in human beings.

How did that humanism, which was both without illusions and sufficiently promising, encounter the spirit of a period? The lecture delivered at Unesco occurred

at a time when Sartre was just becoming 'the' outstanding intellectual figure for the next 30 or so years. It marked a sort of *kairos*, a historical moment when Sartre gradually came to embody a 'generation'. In a way he embodied a generation that believed in regeneration. The period of the Liberation combined an anti-humanist disillusionment and a hope of renewal. That context is evoked by Simone de Beauvoir when she describes the circumstances and the preparation for that lecture in *La Force des choses*. Together with Camus and Koestler they spent the night in various bars, cafés, nightclubs and at a certain moment, around four in the morning, when they were rather tipsy, Sartre laughingly said:

'To think that in a few hours' time I'm going to talk about the writer's responsibility!' And Camus laughed, so did I, writes Simone de Beauvoir, but alcohol has always made me more inclined to tears and when at dawn I found myself alone with Sartre in the streets of Paris, I started to sob over the tragedy of the human condition.

As they crossed the Seine she said: 'I don't know why we don't jump in!' and Sartre, who also shed a few tears in sympathy, replied: 'Well then, let's jump!' The plan was not carried out and our two existentialists were soon born again:

We got home around eight in the morning. When I saw Sartre again at four in the afternoon, his face was haggard, he had slept for two or three hours and had stuffed himself with orthedrin to prepare for his lecture. As I went into the crowded lecture theatre I thought to myself, 'If they could have seen Sartre at six this morning!'

That anecdote reminds us of all the ambiguity of the period, Sartre's rising fame which was accompanied by a great uncertainty, a time of disorientation which nevertheless called for a line to be drawn, a challenge to be thrown down. So in trying to respond promptly to the question we have been asked: 'What do Sartre and Beauvoir have to say to us today?', I would suggest that the answer is already contained in the question. That they should 'say' something in itself presents a theoretical and practical position, since it is not clear that a writer should 'say' anything. But in fact for Sartre, unlike many of his successors, writing was always transitive. His writing deals with objects (consciousness in situations) and is addressed to audiences (the call for generosity from the reader). The writing's commitment is based on its involvement with the voices of the time and particularly the muzzled voices: Sartre is the voice of the voiceless, the voice of Jews, Black Americans, Koreans, Congolese, Algerians, Vietnamese, Palestinians. The writer, the philosopher, the intellectual 'tells' reality, or rather, to use Sartre's language, tells the 'situation' transitively. The distinction between reality and the situation is very important, for to be situated means to occupy a space and time with a project. And Sartre always thought of reality as starting from a project, a freedom that marshals all the elements of a situation in order to gamble on a governing horizon that recuperates the past and projects it towards the future: a directed present.

That direction of time is part of a messianic project for which Sartre, in his fashion, created the political elements. In that sense the regeneration he hoped for resounds with the hopes (and also the tragic events) of his century. Whatever the

exceptional uniqueness of its theoretical contribution, it is part of a whole mythology, that of the new human rising from the ruins of inhuman history, reinvested in the hopes of the post-war period. In *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1960) Sartre makes the French Revolution a sort of paradigm to think about the majority of revolts, and he analyses the founding moment of the oath when the revolutionaries swore to be faithful to themselves and became, Sartre tells us, both their own brothers and their own sons. That possibility of being both brother and son corresponds perfectly to giving birth to oneself, self-generation, and it could be said that Sartre revisited the great revolutionary moments of human history to make them chime with the hopes of the Liberation. The answer to the question (what do they say?) also lies in the messianic address: saying something 'to someone' about what is to come. Sartre's thought, writing, literature and philosophy are connected with a thinking that is addressed, a call to what will come. Right up to the last text, which was published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* and was entitled 'L'espoir maintenant', Sartre sustained this attitude, this challenge conceived in a Stalag at Christmas in 1940.

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The notion of commitment, a kind of Sartrian trademark, should therefore be re-evaluated today because it dims Sartre's place in literature. It is often seen as the instrumentalization of literature for the benefit of politics, which no longer has a very good press. But Sartrian commitment is as far as possible from that requirement. Many sayings express it, for example: 'If literature is not everything it is not worth an hour of labour.' Dozens of texts stress the irreducibility of art and literature. Commitment is above all a 'gamble' on the future. Though political messianism seems to belong to a past era, what remains is the idea of betting on the freedom that is evolving: a bet placed on that tiny movement which makes a totally conditioned being become a being who does not bring back the whole of its conditioning, on that possibility of room for manoeuvre that re-establishes the situation but moves it on and transforms it. And it is probably less in terms of self-generation than movement and disturbance that Sartre's freedom may still 'tell' us something.

Today Sartre seems to me to be the antidote to the determinisms that are returning in force. I will mention two that are especially significant: the determinism of economic thinking, which would have us accept that economic liberalization is the only future for the planet. The other is the scientific determinism of the natural sciences, which persuades us that the workings of thought can be reduced to the workings of the neurones. Sartre always fought against this kind of reductionism. Those two determinisms have altered the figure of the intellectual in recent decades. Instead of being a moral or political conscience intellectuals have become 'experts' who make assessments and stand in the shadow of the authorities. Alternatively, if they do not play the expert game, they see themselves as prophets of bad times who forecast disasters, discern a decline or a damaging clash of civilizations. Whereas with Sartre credit was always given to the growth of freedom in action out of the most unexpected, the most anonymous subjectivizations. Let me remind you of the definition of the Sartrian intellectual: they are not specialists, they are neither experts nor great thinkers; intellectuals can be anyone. Sartre is essentially democratic. Though he was suspicious of formal parliamentary democracy, he firmly supported the

founding idea of democracy: the power of everyman. So the intellectual is potentially each of us once we try to rethink our actions in the light of human purposes, for in the uniqueness of each act the definition of the human comes into play. In Sartre's writing the democratic definition of the intellectual contains the request for a different distribution of roles that eludes social determinisms.

And so it is no longer through the fantasy of political regeneration but rather with this idea of a reconfiguration of roles that Sartre is present among us: recasting sexual, family, social and political roles. Today that is not necessarily being done in Sartre's name but it is Sartre. And if we had to summarize as simply as possible 'what Sartre and Beauvoir have to say to us today', I would answer that on every level bets are never off.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Note

1. Lecture given on 24 November 2005 at Unesco on the occasion of the conference 'What do Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir have to say to us today?', organized in the context of the programme 'Pathways of Thought'. We are grateful to Unesco for allowing us to reproduce it.