

## Culture, alienation and social classes

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The book published in English as *Search for a Method* was included as part of the French edition of *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*. *Search for a Method* could serve as a preface to either *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* or Sartre's several volume study of Flaubert entitled *The Family Idiot*. This book provides an introduction to a dialectical version of psychoanalysis, sociology and what Sartre refers to as the "ideology" of Existentialism. *Search for a Method* takes on the appearance of being a Marxist work, but it is really a debate with Marxism. Sartre later claimed that he had never been a Marxist. His primary task in *Search for a Method* was a defense of Existentialism. This point is made clear in his highly critical remarks about Georg Lukacs's. Sartre was also responding to criticisms of Existentialism by French Marxists like Henri Lefebvre. Sartre suggests that Marxism is a philosophy that expresses the basic philosophical conception of capitalism while Existentialism is an ideology which exists within the framework of the philosophy of Marxism and articulates the reality of the individual as a mode of Being in the world.

In his debate with Marxism, Sartre attempts to formulate the grounds for the intelligibility of culture in relation to historical totalization. In his attempt to formulate the dialectics of individual praxis and history, he elaborates a theory of social class and human agency. From the point of view of this analysis, two particular aspects of his theory are of interest: his conceptions of praxis and the practico-inert.

Sartre does not reify the concept of culture; his is a theory of mediation, in which he attempts to establish the singular unity of individual praxis and history:

The dialectical totalization must include acts, passions, work, and need as well as economic categories; it must at once place the agent or the event back into the historical setting, define him in relation to the orientation of becoming, and determine exactly the meaning of the present as such. (Sartre 1962: 133)

The ordinariness of culture is defined by its negation, by forces and structures limiting freedom.

In opposition to culture as the “field of the given,” Sartre posits human freedom as the need to go beyond the historical facticity of reified institutions and the social relations of scarcity. In this context, need is understood as lack, and freedom (in the form of praxis) attempts to surpass the condition of scarcity.

In this formulation of the problem, culture is presented as contradiction and struggle. In terms of Sartre’s notion of the project, the subjectivity of human experience and practice violates and struggles against objective restraints upon freedom and becoming. At the same time, Sartre posits history as the product of the objectification of praxis. Men and women both produce and are produced by their own practices. Historical totalization is the struggle between freedom and the reified world of the practico-inert. In other words, men and women both exteriorize interiority and interiorize exteriority.

As I will argue, this particular formulation of the problem involves the positing of an ontological conception of freedom. For Sartre, freedom takes the form of a universal in relation to particular fields of institutional restraint. Freedom is understood on the level of a universal precondition in relation to a particular historical condition of the possibility of individual and collective praxis.

Before pursuing this criticism, I will first examine the more concrete analysis contained in Sartre’s formulation. This analysis concerns the relationship between the individual and history. In this formulation, Sartre attempts to integrate the approaches of psychoanalysis, sociology, and existentialism within the theoretical and political perspective of Marxism. He attempts to incorporate these disciplines within Marxism and, in doing so, he extends the perspective of Marxism. This enterprise is both polemical and theoretical in scope. His polemic is written in opposition to the positivist and mechanistic versions of Marxism which had become popular within the French Communist Party in the 1950s.

Sartre’s appropriation of psychoanalysis to Marxism is not another version of the synthesis of Freud and Marx, similar to those developed by the Frankfurt School. Instead, he attempts to appropriate psychoanalysis into a Marxist analysis. In doing so, he intends the domains of investigation to include the family and childhood. In opposition to mechanistic Marxism, Sartre remarks:

As we read them, everything seems to happen as if men experienced their alienation and their reification first in their own work, whereas in actuality each one lives it first, as a child, in his parents' work. (Sartre 1963: 62)

His attempt here is to grasp the significance of childhood.

His analysis avoids the scientific dogma often associated with psychoanalysis. His interest is in disclosing the relationship between childhood and the social totalization each child enters into through his/her experiences within the family:

The family in fact is constituted by and in the general movement of History.  
(Sartre 1963: 62)

According to this formulation, the opaqueness of working class life (in all of its alienation) does not begin at the moment that the worker enters the factory, but is rather mediated through the family he/she is born into. The objective conditions of working class life are lived first on the level of childhood.

The Marxist appropriation of psychoanalysis enables Sartre to formulate the relationship between biography and history. It provides grounds for the formulation of the relationship between concrete social practice and historical totalization:

Psychoanalysis, working within a dialectical totalization, refers on the one side to objective structures, to material conditions, and on the other to the action upon our adult life of the childhood we never wholly surpass. (Sartre 1963: 63-64)

The version of psychoanalysis expressed here has been reconstituted in relation to the Marxist problematic. It is not the psychoanalysis practiced by analysts in either treatment or research. This version of psychoanalysis discovers only particular facts in isolation. It never grasps history.

The reconstituted version of psychoanalysis formulated by Sartre is not confined to the study of sexuality or neurosis. In fact, this formulation of psychoanalysis does not have a distinctive domain of its own. It rather constitutes a moment within the dialectical understanding of society. If such an understanding is to be adequate, objects of study (such as the family and childhood) must be reciprocally connected with other domains of social practice:

The child experiences more than just his family. He lives also—in part through the family—the collective landscape which surrounds him. (Sartre 1962: 79)

Sartre moves from the appropriation of psychoanalysis to the appropriation of the domain of sociology.

In a similar fashion, Sartre does not incorporate either the positivist findings or theoretical framework of bourgeois sociology. Instead, he appropriates its object of study:

At the level of the relations of production and at that of political-social structures, the unique person is found conditioned by his human relations... The person lives and knows his condition more or less clearly through the groups he belongs to. The majority of these groups are local, definite, immediately given. It is clear, in fact, that the factory worker is subject to the pressure of his “production group”, but if, as is the case at Paris, he lives rather far from his place of work, he is equally subject to the pressure of his “residential group”. (Sartre 1963: 66)

Sartre’s interest here is not with particular findings. Instead, he is interested in social and institutional relations as objective conditions influencing social and political practice. These collectives exist both as objective structures and as the subjective conditions of life.

He argues that thus far the practice of sociology has served the interests of the capitalist class against the working class and that it is an instrument made use of in the control of the working class. According to this argument, sociology is not merely the scientific practice of collecting social facts, nor the formulation of general theories of society. Such practices express particular and not universal interests. Sociology serves the interests of capital’s need for control and does not express the universality of science. This is particularly evident to Sartre in the fields of urban and industrial sociology, although he concludes that it also applies to the entire practice of bourgeois sociology in less obvious ways.

After attacking the ideologically embedded practices of sociology, he suggests that a Marxist appropriation of its object domain would serve the interests of the working class against the interests of capital. He argues that a Marxist sociology could be used by the working class in their struggle against capital. Sartre does not spell out the concrete details of how the working class might use sociology as an instrument in its struggle for working class power. One conceivable level of this appropriation is the formulation of counter-ideology through the intellectual apparatuses of working class parties and trade unions.

Concerning the ideological struggle, a Marxist sociology could also engage the predominant bourgeois ideology within the universities and political journalism.

The Marxist version of sociology which Sartre outlines would represent the particular interests of the working class in opposition to the particular interests of capital. According to this argument, a Marxist appropriation of sociology would not express universal interests, since capitalist society is divided into antagonistic classes. According to Sartre's conception, the proletariat is a particular class on the way to becoming a universal class. The notion of universal interest is not conceivable within capitalist society. For Sartre, socialism represents the possibility of attaining a condition of social existence where universal interests might find expression. The achievement of socialism is in no sense inevitable; it expresses an historical possibility.

In a similar fashion to the Marxist appropriation of psychoanalysis, Sartre argues for the appropriation of sociology to the Marxist problematic. As in the case of psychoanalysis, sociology can not merely be absorbed into Marxism. Nor can sociology exist as an autonomous discipline within Marxism. According to his formulation, sociology would be transformed and reconstituted as a moment of the dialectical understanding of historical totalization. Its positivist, theoretical perspectives and methodology would have to be discarded. As in the case of psychoanalysis, the Marxist appropriation of sociology would be in terms of the inclusion of its object of study within the working class political struggle against capitalism.

In Sartre's formulation, the appropriation of psychoanalysis and sociology is intelligible as a movement toward the dialectical formulation of the relationship between individual praxis and historical totalization. This theoretical enterprise involves both the specificity of the concrete social practices of culture and the larger historical process. The aim of Sartre's analysis is to make the connection between culture and history intelligible. It is to surpass the apparent separation between culture and history. Individual praxis is understood as a moment of dialectical intelligibility.

According to Sartre, orthodox Marxism has dissolved the concrete praxis of individuals into a metaphysical conception of social classes and history. For Sartre, this transformation within Marxism represents the re-emergence of idealism within Marxism. According to his reading of the

predominant contemporary Marxist analysis, this analysis begins with a series of dogmatic assumptions as to the nature of historical change. Contemporary Marxists have transformed social class into a metaphysical Being which acts in accordance with scientific laws of history. The concrete praxis of individuals is excluded from the version of Marxism which Sartre polemicizes against.

The central point of his analysis is to reintroduce individual and collective praxis into Marxist political analysis. In order to do this, he relies upon his own existential conception of individual consciousness and freedom. He asserts the irreducible primacy of these conceptions:

A product of his product, fashioned by his work and by the social conditions of production, man at the same time exists in the milieu of his products and furnishes the substance of the "Collectives" which consume him. (Sartre 1963: 79)

By means of the ideology of Existentialism, Sartre reintroduces the praxis of the individual into history.

In this formulation of Existential Marxism, history is analyzed in terms of the praxis of individuals and collectives. The insertion of Existentialism into Marxism insists upon the conclusion that men and women are both the subjects and objects of history. However, they do not make history as isolated individuals, but in relation to a collective struggle within given conditions:

Now it is in terms of his relation with collectives—that is, in his "social field" considered in its most immediate aspect—that man learns to know his condition. Here again the particular connections are one mode of realizing and of living the universal in its materiality. (Sartre 1963: 78-79)

According to this formulation of the problem, the social Being of a class does not dissolve the existential reality of individual praxis or consciousness. Instead, the individual is transformed by his/her situated praxis. For Sartre, class is always a multiplicity of agents and never a singular unity.

According to this formulation, individual praxis embodies the subjectivity of a trans-individual freedom. Freedom by means of the praxis of individuals goes beyond the given materiality of the world. This materiality is understood as including both the domains of nature and social institutions. On the level of universals, freedom opposes material

scarcity. This condition of scarcity presents itself as both a given fact and as an historical product.

In Sartre's analysis, the concepts of freedom and scarcity are presented on two levels. They are presented as both the universal prior conditions determining human praxis and the specific historical conditions in which concrete praxis takes place. On the level of the universal, they provide ontological grounds for the meaning of human existence. They constitute the dialectic of freedom and necessity. This dialectic is the formulation of a political problem in philosophic terms.

These universal conceptions form a frame of reference for the analysis of individual and group praxis. In this analysis, Sartre continually moves back and forth between the domains of concrete social praxis and the universal preconditions of this activity. The universal categories of freedom and scarcity are posited as the underlying explanation for human praxis. As categories, they form the prior condition for the understanding of events and actions.

Within his analysis, individual subjects are formulated as the agents of historical change. Within historically defined circumstances, human actors produce and reproduce the social world. They act in combination and in relation to other subjects:

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. (Sartre 1963: 91)

Human subjects do not merely adapt to given circumstances; they go beyond these circumstances.

Individual subjects are analyzed by Sartre in relation to objective conditions limiting the range of choices immediately available. These constraints are referred to as "the practico-inert." However, this domain of limitation or restraint is never absolute. Instead, this field constitutes an historical condition to be surpassed through human praxis:

It is by transcending the given toward the field of possible and by realizing one possibility from among all the others that the individual objectifies himself and contributes to making History. (Sartre 1963: 93)

The history made results from the objectified surpassing of this given field.

The objective conditions of social life exist as alterity. Although these conditions result from prior objectifications of human praxis, they are often experienced as forces external to human design or control. Sartre's analysis attempts to go beyond these appearances by restoring the relationships and activities which constituted them:

Thus man makes History; this means that he objectifies himself in it and is alienated in it. In this sense History, which is the proper work of all activity and of all men, appears to men as a foreign force exactly insofar as they do not recognize the meaning of their enterprise (even when locally successful) in the total, objective result. (Sartre 1963: 89)

According to this conception, alienation does not result from the isolated praxis of an individual. It results from a particular organization of society, which in turn determines the ability of subjects to comprehend the underlying social relations and forces.

The particular organization of capitalist society forms a field of denied possibilities for individual workers. These denied possibilities are formulated by Sartre as the negation of freedom:

Every man is defined negatively by the sum total of possibles which are impossible for him; that is by a future more or less blocked off. (Sartre 1963: 95)

Racism, sexism, and class relations are concrete examples of such restraints upon the realization of freedom through praxis. However, such restraints never constitute absolute barriers. The future is always "more or less" limited by these institutional practices.

Sartre's theory of history presupposes a structure of intentionality governing the practices of social life. This intentionality projects individual praxis toward surpassing, toward the realization of freedom. This presupposition as to the nature of intentionality is apparent in the way in which Sartre defines the object of his analysis:

The most rudimentary behavior must be determined both in relation to the real and present factors which condition it and in relation to a certain object, still to come, which it is trying to bring into being. This is what we call the project.

(Sartre 1963: 91)

The goal of surpassing given conditions is defined as an attribute of the activity analyzed. The aim of human praxis is the realization of freedom by going beyond the given field of the possible.

Sartre attempts to analyze concrete human praxis in relation to historical totalization. He attempts to demonstrate the relationship between the ordinary practices of everyday life and the larger historical process. He attempts to demonstrate the relationship between the individual moments of this process and that history is only intelligible as a relationship between praxis and the objective results of praxis interiorized and re-exteriorized. This relationship is formulated as the dialectical relationship between subject and object.

The relationship between subject and object is formulated on two levels; on the level of the universal and the particular. On the level of the universal, this relationship takes the form of the relationship between freedom and materiality. This is an abstract, trans-historical formulation of the problem. The particular formulation expresses the relationship between concrete individuals and the social-historical situations in which they live.

Sartre attempts to analyze concrete social praxis in terms of his conceptions of freedom and materiality. These concepts form the grounds for his analysis of the concrete. The particular consciousness and intentionality of human social existence in relation to a field of possible action expresses the more general relationship between freedom and materiality. In this formulation, individual praxis expresses both individual subjectivity and human freedom in general. Such praxis is both historical and ontological. Sartre's philosophical conception of freedom expresses the trans-historical essence of men and women.

Even in socialist society, the fundamental nature of this relationship would not be altered. The field of the possible will have been extended by collective human praxis. Scarcity will no longer be produced in terms of the capitalist need for profit. The bourgeois individual will have been replaced by the socialist individual. However, the relationship between subject and object will not have changed.

Although my discussion thus far has primarily made reference to Sartre's theoretical formulations contained in *Search for a Method*, his basic conception of freedom is also present in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*. In this latter work, a more complex historical analysis is set forth. Additional concepts are developed in his attempt to make history

intelligible. However, his basic conception of freedom as an eternal category is not altered. It remains the fundamental conception underlying his analysis.

In *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre continues to posit freedom as a trans-historical category of human existence. This freedom projects human beings toward a future not yet realized:

From this point of view, it must be pointed out that the practico-inert field exists, that it is real, and that free human activities are not thereby eliminated, that they are not even altered in their translucidity as projects in the process of being realized.

(Sartre 1976: 323)

The practico-inert (in the form of social, political, and economic institutions) conditions the praxis of concrete individuals, but can not alter or transform the essence of human freedom. Freedom itself remains unchanged and eternal.

For Sartre, the field of possibility (referred to as the practico-inert) is both the result of human praxis and a real constraint upon men and women as they lead their everyday lives: “The field exists: in short, it is what surrounds and conditions us” (Sartre 1976: 323). This field of existing institutions conditions and shapes the praxis of individuals and groups, but does not, and can not, alter the existence of human freedom. Alienation is central to his analysis of class relations. Two forms of alienation that Sartre discusses are the series and counter-finality. In the series, people as the Other are to be found in a Queue, listening or viewing a radio or TV broadcast or participating in the market. Each of these forms of alienation is defined by impotence and the anti-human. In the anti-human violence results from the competition between people over scarcity. For Sartre, scarcity is the fundamental cause of violence, the transformation of human beings into the anti-human. The Other is perceived as constituting a threat or danger. The alternative to the series is the formation of the fused group. Social classes can take the form of either series or fused groups. Classes as fused groups require the perception of the bourgeois class as the enemy of the working class, who is the source of danger. Fused groups by their very nature are an unstable form of group. There is always the danger of returning to the alienation of the series and alterity.

Counter-finality refers to a negative unintended consequence of praxis. Sartre offers three main examples of counter-finality:

deforestation in China for hundreds of years, the importation of plundered gold from South America into Spain during the sixteenth century and pollution resulting from industrialization in England during the industrial revolution. Deforestation led to soil erosion and flooding; the importing of gold led to the deflation of the value of money, and industrialization led to air and water pollution. Other examples of counter-finality could be cited. The product of man's product becomes his enemy and a non-human force that opposes human freedom. It also limits the intelligibility of the natural and social worlds.

Sartre's analysis of class relations traces the history of the French working class from the 1830s, to 1848, to the role of syndicalism in the 1890s to the class conflicts of the Popular Front government of the 1930s. He also formulates a theory of the fused group as it moves through the pledged group, organization, institution and bureaucracy. The danger of any fused group is its domination by a bureaucracy and the return to a form of series. Why this takes place requires a historical analysis. It is clear from what Sartre has to say about the series and the fused group that there is no historical law determining the process of change. Sartre identifies processes like fraternity-terror. The fused group itself makes use of terror against its own members to prevent the return to a series. For Sartre, scarcity is the root cause of violence and the creation of the anti-human of colonial domination, war and class struggle.

The existence of scarcity provides the grounds for conflict. Social classes confront each other within a field of scarcity. Social classes take the form of series until they have a common enemy that represents a danger to confront. At that point, they form fused groups engaged in class struggle. This conception of social class is analogous to Marx's class in-itself and class for-itself.

For Sartre, there is no such thing as the dialectics of nature since for him dialectics presupposes human beings who possess the capacity to understand the process of history that they are making. Nature possesses no capacity to understand anything. It is understood by human beings by means of analytic reason. Sartre's argument here is with Engels rather than Marx. He states clearly that he accepts Marx's analysis of the capitalist mode of production and the theory of surplus value presented by Marx in *Capital*. Sartre was also engaging in a debate with the intellectuals of the French Communist Party who defended the notion of

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a dialectics of nature. For Sartre, only human history is capable of dialectical reason, the self-understanding of the history made by human beings. He was engaging in an attempt to influence the intellectuals of the French Communist Party. The primary result of his efforts was that he was viewed as an enemy of the PFC. It was not until May of 1968 that his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* was read and taken seriously.

*References*

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