The New Sartre: Explorations in Postmodernism

NIK FARRELL FOX

Continuum

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THE NEW SARTRE

Explorations in Postmodernism

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First published 2003

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-8264-6183-2 (hardback)
0-8264-6184-0 (paperback)

Typeset by Aarontype Limited, Easton, Bristol
Printed and bound in Great Britain by The Bath Press, Bath

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Preface

This book emerged gradually over a number of years and sprang from a deep fascination with the work of Sartre and Foucault. As I steeped myself in the nuances, concerns, evolutions and intricacies of each, it struck me more and more that there was a great deal in common between them in spite of the polemic between structuralism and humanism that conscripted them into opposing warring camps in France in the 1960s. This soon led me to broaden my enquiry to other post-structuralist philosophers such as Derrida and Deleuze where again I found significant areas of overlap that unite them with Sartre alongside the oft-repeated differences that separate them. As the French post-structuralists are all linked so closely to the postmodern ethos, it seemed like a natural extension to somehow bring Sartre into the 'postmodern equation' in a move that would recast his traditional image and bring attention to the contemporary resonance of his philosophical project and critical spirit.

Although I endeavour in this book to provide a systematic and comprehensive overview of Sartre's philosophical work, particular emphasis is given to his two main theoretical texts, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (vol. 1), as they contain the fullest and most explicit expression of his philosophical viewpoint. However, I also refer to Sartre's other key theoretical texts, such as *Anti-Semite and Jew*, *Words*, the *Cahiers* and *Transcendence of the Ego*, as well as to his political essays, existential biographies and interviews he gave in the 1970s, in an attempt to trace the full trajectory and evolution of his thought from the 1930s to his death in 1980.

Similarly, although I will refer to some elements of structuralism, my main focus is on the French post-structuralists (Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, Baudrillard, Lyotard) as postmodernism is much more ostensibly and directly linked to these thinkers than to their

structuralist counterparts (Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Althusser) whose theoretical quest for objectivity and scientific truth places them much closer to the modernist paradigm. Among the post-structuralists, greater emphasis is given to Foucault and Baudrillard as their work can generally be seen as paradigmatic of the distinction between Affirmative postmodernism (Foucault) and Sceptical postmodernism (Baudrillard) which this book employs throughout.

Inevitably, in a project of this scope, there are certain omissions that may disappoint the reader. One may notice, for instance, that there is only scant reference to Sartre's early work on the imagination or to his novels and plays. Although his famous literary texts such as *No Exit* and *Nausea* are bursting with philosophical themes, ascertaining how the views of his characters actually represent his own, is not straightforward. Similarly, I make only passing reference to those who had an important influence on the evolution of Sartre's thought, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger. Extensive and scholarly studies that examine Sartre's relation to these thinkers have already been undertaken and including them in detail would inevitably have meant sacrificing depth on the French post-structuralists.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and extend my gratitude especially to Mike Scriven for his initial support and enthusiasm, but also to Christina Howells, Colin Davis, Ben O'Donohoe, William McBride and all others who have made valuable comments on some version of the text. Thanks also to Tristan Palmer at Continuum for all his efforts and support.

Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to my family, young and old, whose patience, warmth and love nourished my spirit throughout and made this possible.

Notes on the Text

The following abbreviations are used in the text to designate those works by Sartre most frequently cited or referred to:

BN — *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, tran. H. Barnes, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956.

CDR — *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Volume 1 *Theory of Practical Ensembles*, tran. A. Sheridan-Smith, London: New Left Books, 1976.

SM — *Search for a Method*, tran. H. Barnes, London: Vintage Books, 1968.

Au renardeau

Introduction

> Even after death our acts pursue us. We survive ourselves in them, even when they develop in opposite directions that we would not have wanted. (Sartre in Contat and Rybalka 1970, 256)

> for every thought one must expect a strange tomorrow. (Baudrillard, 1987, 99)

In the eyes of many, Jean-Paul Sartre was the foremost intellectual of the twentieth century, a master thinker of freedom whose diverse literary talents earned him notoriety as a philosopher, playwright, novelist and polemicist. And yet, Sartre is often seen as a philosopher of a world that has passed, a child and relic of modernity whose voice rang out amidst the alienations and horrors of the twentieth century but which is now scarcely detectable in the soundwaves of our contemporary postmodern condition. After all, history has it that the Sartrean corpse was laid to rest not only in the cemetery at Montparnasse upon his death in April 1980, but also twenty years or so earlier when a (post-)structuralist revolt organized by Foucault, Derrida and others overthrew the monarchical Sartrean regime and buried its humanist entrails in the ground.

In some respects, it is not altogether unsurprising that standard interpretations have cited Sartrean existentialism as the principal target for the (post-)structuralist revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. An initial sense of hostility between Sartre and the (post-)structuralists found expression in a series of polemical exchanges that took place in the 1960s between Sartre and Lévi-Strauss, Foucault and others in which Sartre was criticized for relying on a humanist and idealist theory of the subject and, in turn, criticized (post-)structuralism for dissolving human freedom by holding history hostage to the play of impersonal forces. As Foucault describes it, the (post-)structuralist attack on Sartre arose

'from a dissatisfaction with the phenomenological theory of the subject' and 'involved different escapades, subterfuges, breakthroughs . . . in the direction of linguistics, psychoanalysis or Nietzsche' (in Raulet, 1983, 199). It was a matter, as he states elsewhere, 'of calling this theme of the subject into question once again, that great fundamental postulate which French philosophy, from Descartes until our own time, had never abandoned' (Foucault, 1991, 56).

This polemic between Sartre and Foucault perhaps reached its greatest point of intensity in 1966 when, in an article in *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, Foucault identified Sartre's philosophy with a bygone era, cursorily dismissing Sartre and Merleau-Ponty as 'courageous and generous men' who were animated by a spirit that had passed from the intellectual scene. In response, Sartre acknowledged the importance of *Les Mots et les choses* but criticized Foucault for avoiding the question of history (i.e. how one episteme is supplanted by another), arguing that Foucault effectively 'replace[s] movies with a magic lantern, movement with a sequence of immobile images'.[1]

Since Sartre's death in 1980, however, interpretations of his work have begun to probe the underbelly of this standard account. In recent years the phenomenon of 'the new Sartre' has gradually been emerging out of the ashes of his philosophical *œuvre* which points to a fundamental reappraisal of Sartre's work in its relation to post-structuralism and, in a wider sense, to postmodernism.[2] In Christina Howells' words, this idea of 'the new Sartre' presents him

> as a figure whose diversity was far from being mastered, who could not, without distortion or impoverishment, be identified with the 'classical existentialism' of the 1940s, and whose relationship to Structuralism and Post-Structuralism, as well as to psychoanalysis, Marxism, and literary theory, was far more complex than ha[s] generally been supposed. (1992, 1)

In this respect, traditional accounts of post-war intellectual history in France can be said to have pitted Sartre as a theoretical adversary to (post-)structuralists[3] such as Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze and Derrida far too readily. Moreover, standard interpretations of Sartre's work can be seen to rely too heavily on certain themes or on particular passages in his

'classical existentialist' works of the 1940s to the serious neglect of other elements in his work of this period, and indeed, in the wider trajectory of his work as a whole. Howells makes the further claim that since Sartre's two main works of philosophy, *BN* and *CDR*, pre-date the main wave of (post-)structuralist texts in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, they can be seen in effect to prefigure many key (post-)structuralist themes such as

> the decentred subject, the rejection of a metaphysics of presence, the critique of bourgeois humanism and individualism, the concept of the reader as producer of the text's multiple meanings, the recognition of language and thought structures as masters rather than mastered in most acts of discourse and thinking, [and] a materialist philosophy of history as detotalized and fragmented. (1992, 2)

These themes, she argues, are not 'the inventions of Lacan, Foucault, Lévi-Strauss and Derrida', but can 'be found in Sartre's later works' and are 'present from the outset' in even his early work which dates from *Transcendence of the Ego* in 1936 (1992, 2). Taken together, they serve to contradict the simple identification of Sartre with his usual image of a classical intellectual steeped in a Cartesian tradition of modern philosophy which is, by implication, a form of philosophy diametrically opposed to the postmodernizing strategies of the post-structuralists.

Until now, Sartre has been a marginal and mainly absent figure in discussions of postmodernism which have tended to focus upon critiques of modernism put forward by the French post-structuralists such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard. When he is included, it is usually as no more than the target for these critiques. My aim in this book is to bring Sartre in from the margins and, for the first time, to place him at the focal centre of the postmodern debate through a *systematic* analysis which will trace the strands of opposition and convergence between Sartre's work and post-structuralist theory across a broad range of study. This will involve piecing together suggestions made by others in essays and articles into an integrated and comprehensive overview that will attempt to assemble a full and faithful picture of Sartre's philosophy from the 1930s to his death in 1980. In the process, I endeavour to expand the

idea of 'the new Sartre' into one that recasts his popular image from an archetypal and classical modernist thinker to one who shares a complex and multifaceted relationship to the postmodern ethos. This will, I hope, have the further effect of highlighting the contemporary relevance and value of Sartre's work as a kind of critical searchlight that helps to cut through the mist of our present postmodern condition. Much of this value, I argue, derives from the way in which Sartre's work occupies a transitional space between modernist and postmodernist categories, integrating elements of each into a constellated and synthetic whole. Sometimes this has the effect of catapulting the Sartrean system into contradiction and antinomy but for the most part it serves to form it as a window through which we are better placed to view and to reflect upon the inadequacies and the revelations of postmodernist theory and its trenchant critique of modernity.

In this respect, one can cite Roland Barthes who has located the special value of Sartre's work in its 'divided' or 'transitional' nature.[4] In an interview in 1976 with Jacques Chancel, Barthes put forward the view that Sartre can be seen as the exemplary intellectual of his period due to the fact that he was situated at the crossroads of two cultures – at the point of division between the disintegration of the old and the birth of the new. This was evident in the way that Sartre managed to straddle both pre-war and post-war ideological and political currents in France, thus marking him out, according to Barthes, as a uniquely important transitional figure. As we will see throughout this book, Sartre's philosophy can be situated in a transitional space that straddles the divide and creates a sometimes uneasy tension between a postmodern sense of despair, plurality, fragmentation and indeterminacy and a modernist longing for comprehension, meaning, constructivism and totality.

In recent years, the idea of postmodernism has dominated academic dialogue in the humanities and the social sciences. Although the term 'postmodernism' has long been in use in one form or another to describe developments in literary theory, architecture and art which attack the dominant modernist paradigm, it has become associated more recently with theories of cultural, political, economic and philosophical change, taking its inspiration from critiques of modernist theory found in the work of the French post-structuralists.[5] As we will see, however, the identification of postmodernism with post-structuralism is not always

straightforward or precise. In the work of some postmodernists like Foucault and Deleuze, for example, it is possible to find a complex blend of pre-modern, modern and postmodern perspectives and thus it is misleading to describe them as postmodernists *tout court*. Added to these difficulties is the fact that postmodernists tend to retreat from the label 'postmodern' since they sense it promotes a singular view of reality that encourages closure and denies complexity. Moreover, some postmodernists like Foucault and Lyotard shift their focus and theoretical approach quite considerably during the course of their work and move away from postmodernist concerns to more overtly modernist ones like the status of the subject and the Enlightenment (Foucault) or the concept of justice (Lyotard) in their later work. This means that, in general, most post-structuralists have been anxious to avoid any description of their work as 'postmodernist'. This is particularly apposite in the case of Baudrillard who by the end of the 1980s was heralded as 'the high priest of postmodernism' and yet who stated openly 'I have nothing to do with postmodernism' (in Gane, 1991, 46–7). To complicate matters further, the terms 'modern' and 'postmodern' have been so widely applied that their meaning, as Bernstein notes, has become 'vague, ambiguous, and slippery'. This is particularly so with 'postmodernism' which signifies a prevailing mood that is 'amorphous, elusive, protean . . . difficult to pin down and characterise', but which 'nevertheless exerts a powerful influence . . . that radically calls into question entrenched ways of thinking, acting, and feeling' (1993, 205, 204).

In spite of these considerations, however, it is possible to draw definite parallels between post-structuralism and postmodernism as well as to identify general determinate features that demarcate the modern from the postmodern. Although post-structuralism and postmodernism are not identical, in so much as postmodernists are orientated more towards cultural critique whereas post-structuralists focus on method and epistemological matters, they do overlap considerably, the major difference being one of emphasis more than substance. To help distinguish between a variety of attitudes towards modernity found in the works of the post-structuralists, in this book I make use of a general distinction between 'Affirmative' and 'Sceptical' forms of postmodernism.[6] Although this distinction is not always clear-cut (some thinkers, like Foucault, can be interpreted either as 'Affirmative' or

'Sceptical' according to the emphasis of a particular text), it does help us to distinguish between postmodernists who generally seek to refashion or to reconstruct affirmative modernist notions such as individual agency and political progress and those, like Baudrillard, who view affirmative projects such as Guattari's model of 'molecular revolution' or Foucault's idea of 'resistance to power' as 'archaic, regressive or nostalgic' (Baudrillard, 1983a, 60). As we will see, Sartre is significantly closer to Affirmative forms of postmodernism like Foucault's than he is to the Sceptical form practised by Baudrillard.

In general terms, it is the radical questioning or 'unmaking' of modern assumptions and modes of understanding that, as Ihab Hassan points out, can be said to define the postmodern movement:

> It is an antinomian moment that assumes a vast unmasking of the Western mind – what Michel Foucault might call the postmodern *episteme*. I say 'unmasking', though other terms are now *de rigueur*: for instance, deconstruction, decentering, disappearance, demystification, discontinuity, *différance*, dispersion etc. Such terms express an ontological rejection of the traditional full subject, the *Cogito* of Western philosophy. They express, too, an epistemological obsession with fragments, and a corresponding commitment to minorities in politics, sex and language. To think well, to feel well, to act well, to read well according to the *episteme* of unmasking, is to refuse the tyranny of wholes: totalization in human endeavour is potentially totalitarian. (1987, 37)

For the purposes of this book, I identify three main areas of inquiry in which it is possible to discern points of difference that separate modernist and postmodernist approaches:

1. Against the modernist idea of a rational, humanist, unified and autonomous *subject*, postmodernists call for a conception of the subject as socially and linguistically decentred, fragmented and multiple.
2. In reaction to modernist assumptions of *social* and *historical* coherence, linearity and causality, as well as to its macro-theoretical, universalizing and totalizing claims, postmodernists stress 'micro-theory', relativism, indeterminacy, detotalization and multiplicity.

3. In opposition to modernist forms of *political* understanding and organization (i.e. Marxism and liberalism), postmodernists call for new forms of political life which stress plurality, locality and difference. Where modern political strategies focus centrally upon (macro) issues of political economy and the state, postmodernists concentrate instead on 'superstructural' concerns relating to identity, culture and the realm of everyday life.

Throughout this book I examine these three general areas of difference between modernist theory and postmodernist critique as they relate to Sartre's philosophy and to the work of the French post-structuralists.

In Chapter 1 I begin by looking at Sartre's approach to the subject, tracing the development from the radically free consciousness of *BN* to the more 'encumbered' subject of his later work, before considering the deconstruction of the subject undertaken by (post-)structuralists in the 1960s and 1970s. Then I compare Sartre's theory of the subject with post-structuralist approaches to the subject (put forward by Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari) and examine the common features and similarities between the two. In particular, I argue that Sartre's idea of a contingent, non-essential subject (which he argues for consistently throughout his work) has much in common with, and indeed prefigures, the decentred subject theorized by post-structuralists and postmodernists. In the final section I consider the critical implications of Sartrean and postmodernist theories of the subject, assessing both their positive critical value as well as their theoretical limitations and closures. In regard to the former, I highlight the ways in which the Sartrean and postmodernist subject improves upon the praxis-centric or instrumental view of the subject that dominates the modernist outlook. On a less positive note, I criticize Sartrean and postmodernist theorizations of the subject for failing to give sufficient recognition to the importance of social contexts and other people in projects of self-development. As a result both tend, I argue, to provide only a 'thin' and rather monadic conception of individuality.

In Chapter 2 I begin by looking at Sartre's social theory in *BN* and how he set about revising it subsequently in the *CDR*. After examining the key elements of Sartre's conceptual apparatus in the *CDR* (praxis/inertia, the practico-inert, the fused/serial group, totalization, dialectical reason,

the progressive-regressive method), I outline the social theory of postmodernism by looking in particular at the genealogical approach of Foucault and the semiological theory of Baudrillard. Then I compare Sartrean and postmodernist socio-historical theory, focusing mainly on their respective critiques of Marxist economism and teleology. These critiques, I argue, give us a view of history based on the notion of *contingency* that rallies against Enlightenment conceptions of history as a process of linearity and progress. Moreover, both extend critical analysis beyond narrow reductionisms of the social field to uncover sources of alienation and domination that exist beyond the sphere of political economy. In the final section I critically assess Sartrean and postmodernist approaches, highlighting both the ways in which they expand our understanding of society and history as well as some of the difficulties that arise from within their general theoretical frameworks.

Political theory and practice are the focus of Chapter 3 where I begin by tracing the development of Sartre's political outlook from the detached, individualist form of anarchism which characterized his political thinking in the 1930s to his committed 'gauchiste' perspective of the 1970s. This development is seen through the varying attitudes Sartre adopts towards Marxism and the French Communist Party (PCF) through the course of his life which change from early indifference in the 1930s to uncritical support in the early 1950s and finally to disillusionment and apostasy in the 1970s. Then I examine this revolt against traditional Marxist theory and political practice by looking at the politics of postmodernism through the events of May 1968 in France which, I argue, represent an important transition point in the formation of a new political practice which contrasts markedly with the labour-centric, centralizing, Party-based strategies of modern (Marxo-liberal) politics. In the final section I critically examine Sartrean and postmodern political theory using criticisms made of Foucault's postmodern political search for self-invention by Alex Callinicos (1989) as a means of assessing the opposition between modern macro-politics and postmodern micro-politics. I go on to examine the ways in which Sartre's political theory reproduces some of the difficulties in both modern and postmodern perspectives as well as the more positive ways in which it helps to resolve this critical opposition.

Finally, in Chapter 4 I draw together the conclusions and critical observations of the previous three chapters into a systematic overview

that assesses the interplay and relative influence of the modern and the postmodern in Sartre's work and how this impacts upon the growing phenomenon of 'the new Sartre'. Beyond this, I outline the contemporary relevance and value of Sartre's work as a critical resource through which to clarify and to evaluate the current discourse of postmodernism.

1

The Question of the Subject

> Our entire science still lies under the misleading influence of language and has not disposed of that little changeling, the 'subject'. (Nietzsche, 1967, 179)

> I don't want to be integrated, nor do I want my lovely red blood to fatten up that lymphatic beast: I won't be so silly as to call myself an 'antihumanist'. I am not a humanist, that's all. (Roquentin in Sartre, 1966a, 118)

If, as Alfred North Whitehead famously remarked, the history of western philosophy can be read as a footnote to Plato, then much the same can be said of modern French philosophy and René Descartes. The Cartesian subject founded on the certainty of the cogito is the main reference point and critical target for Sartrean and post-structuralist theorizations of the subject.

In his famous 'method of doubt' that he outlines in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes argues for a disjunctive or dualistic picture of self and world. In doubting the existence of the outside world which, Descartes imagines, might be the product of the sleight-of-hand of an evil demon (*malin génie*), one thing alone is certain – that is, my own existence. My most sceptical doubt, he argues, is itself an act of thinking that proves my existence – *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am). From this basic starting point of an indubitable thinking subject, Descartes proceeds to sketch a dualistic philosophy that founds a binarist logic which lies at the heart of the antinomies of modern western philosophy (subject/object, reason/emotion, body/soul, self/world, freedom/necessity). All the French post-structuralists without exception direct their critical venom towards this binarist system of reasoning that emerges from the thinking and disengaged Cartesian subject. As we will see,

Sartre's relation to the Cartesian cogito is a complex one, veering in his early work between repudiation and repetition.

The Sartrean subject

The existential pour-soi

Sartre's early phenomenological and existentialist work (dating from *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1936) to *Being and Nothingness* (1943)) is commonly seen as a prime example of the (modern) humanist tradition in French philosophy which (post-)structuralists relentlessly attacked in the 1960s, putting forward their own form of theoretical anti-humanism as a corrective. Sartre's theory of the subject (as *pour-soi*) in *BN* has been interpreted in this light as an essentially Cartesian construct divorced from material, social, historical and linguistic configuration. In particular, it was Sartre's popular conception of absolute freedom in *BN* which his detractors criticized most of all, arguing that he effectively committed the cardinal sin of idealism by reducing the impact of circumstance and situation to no more than a function of individual freedom. As Sartre states:

> What we call freedom is impossible to distinguish from the being of 'human reality'. Man does not exist first in order to be free subsequently; there is no difference between the being of a man and his being free. (*BN*, 30)

> Man cannot be sometimes a slave and sometimes free; he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all. (*BN*, 516)

In *BN* Sartre insists that all situations are equally transcendable by the individual; however much they impact upon us, we are always free, by dissolving their significance, to sidestep or 'nihilate' the force of this impact:

> There is no privileged situation. We mean by this that there is no situation in which the given would crush beneath its weight the freedom which constitutes it as such – and that conversely there is no situation in which the for-itself would be more free than others. (*BN*, 549)

Even in the deepest, darkest abysses of human impotence and suffering, Sartre maintains, 'the executioner's tools cannot dispense us from being free' (*BN*, 587). Whether I am in the grip of torture or in a state of complete and abject servitude, this impacts on me only to the extent that I 'embrace' this within my project and attach significance to it. In the case of the slave, for instance, 'if . . . he chooses to revolt, slavery, far from being first an obstacle to this revolt, takes its meaning and its coefficient of adversity only from this revolt' (*BN*, 635). Thus, for Sartre, the weight of circumstance and objective conditions that situations bring to bear on consciousness do not dissolve its freedom but form the very basis of that freedom: 'There can be a for-itself only as engaged in a resisting world. Outside of this engagement the notions of freedom, of determinism, of necessity lose all meaning' (*BN*, 621).

Whatever situation I am born or thrust into, this simply defines the particular terrain in which I am free to determine the meaning of my life (*BN*, 245–6). According to Sartre, it is only the constitutive power of the individual project which causes there to be 'an organization of things in situation' (*BN*, 509). One example he uses to illustrate this is the prospect of being faced with a steep mountain slope. The 'brute given' of the mountain face (its slippiness, inaccessibility, the severity of its contours, etc.) constitutes what Sartre calls the 'coefficient of adversity in things' (*BN*, 482). This we cannot change of course (in the immediate term at least), but, he insists, this forms a precondition rather than a limit on freedom since freedom consists in transcending the 'given'. If I am an artist contemplating the aesthetic form of the mountain instead of a climber practically orientated towards it, my project would screen its unscalability and effectively put this aspect 'out of circulation': 'the crag is not revealed as scalable or unscalable; it is manifested as beautiful or ugly' (*BN*, 488).

The general term Sartre uses to describe the weight of our social and material configuration is what he calls *facticity*. This involves our being thrown into a world that pre-exists us and into a web of situations that are not all of our choosing. As he makes clear in *BN*, however, facticity encroaches upon us only to the extent that we integrate it into our personal project – I am always able to 'disengage myself from the world where I had been engaged' (*BN*, 39). The language that I speak, the historical situation of my race and culture, my gender, my childhood