

THE DILEMMA OF EXISTENTIAL MARXISM: SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR AND
JEAN-PAUL SARTRE IN POSTWAR FRANCE

by

CHRISTOPHER DAVID BROOKS

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Dr. John McCole

Christopher Brooks	for the degree of	Bachelor of Arts
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Approved:

Dr. John McCole

In Postwar France Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre were engaged in an intense political dialogue with the forces of Communism as they were then manifested in the French Communist Party and the Soviet Union. This paper is an immanent critique of Beauvoir and Sartre in their political positions. It attempts to examine whether or not they lived up to their own code of ethics as contained in their purely philosophical writings in their actions and positions in postwar France. This paper was written as a standard research paper; translated works of Beauvoir and Sartre were used in conjunction with secondary sources to help define and critique their politics and the implications of their political stances from 1945-1956. It concludes that Sartre and Beauvoir failed to live up to their own standards in that they supported Communism when it was clearly not in accordance with the kind of existential ethics they had codified in their earlier philosophical works.

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CHAPTER I

In the post-W.W.II period Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir--the pre-eminent voices of existentialism in France and two of the most respected and well known intellectuals in the world at the time--carried on a strange alliance with Communism that defied the mechanics of typical political affiliations. Neither Sartre or Beauvoir ever joined the French Communist Party (PCF) and on numerous occasions they were viciously attacked in PCF journals by the leading figures of French Communism. Likewise, both Sartre and Beauvoir attacked the rigid dogmatism of the PCF and called into question the legitimacy of the PCF's claim to serve socialism and the rightness of the PCF and Soviet Russia's methods. Regardless of the ambivalence between the existentialists and the communists, however, as often as Sartre and Beauvoir attempted to undermine the authority of the USSR and the PCF they defended communism in general and the USSR and PCF specifically from outside attacks.

Sartre and Beauvoir's support of Communism is deeply problematic. Leading intellectual figures at the time rebuked them for supporting a regime that much of the world considered tyrannical. Many called into question whether communism as it was manifested in the Soviet Union was really Marxist at all, a question that Sartre posed on many occasions as well. Finally, contemporaries of Sartre and Beauvoir questioned the validity of Marxism itself; as Raymond Aron writes in *Marxism and the Existentialists*, "The so-called capitalist regime...does not bring about the pauperization of the masses, it does not spontaneously create the division of the social body into a minority of exploiters and a mass of the exploited, it does not dig its own grave¹." Aron is a useful counterpoint

¹Raymond Aron, *Marxism and the Existentialists*, ed. Ruth Nanda Anshen, trans. Helen

to Sartre and Beauvoir since he admits that he “wished with all (his) heart²” that Marxism was factually accurate in its assumptions and he regretted having to abandon its assertions. Regardless of the criticism leveled against them, however, both Sartre and Beauvoir accepted some of the fundamental assumptions of Marxism and it was their Marxist sentiments which drew them into their problematic relationship with the forces of Communism at the time.

Modern historians continue to attack Sartre and Beauvoir in particular, and French intellectuals of the postwar period in general, for their support or at least focus on Communism. Tony Judt’s formidable *Past Imperfect* begins with the simple statement that “a generation of French Intellectuals...was swept into the vortex of Communism³.” and he then goes on to analyze and rebuke the actions of a vast array of the above generation, Sartre and Beauvoir in particular. As Judt says “From the privileged perspective of the last years of our century, the response of French intellectuals to these matters [Communism]...seem strange and distant, echoes of a political and cultural universe from which we are now far, far removed⁴.” While Judt’s work is both comprehensive and well-focused, it rests very comfortably in “the privileged perspective” of the present and neglects to consider Soviet Communism, and Marxism in general, as living hypotheses that at least at the time may well have deserved serious attention. Judt’s work is confidently triumphalist⁵ in that he is free to scold Sartre, Beauvoir and many of their contemporaries for holding “such silly opinions⁶” as to engage, and often support, Communism, since Communism as it was manifested in the Soviet empire has as

Weaver, Robert Addis, and John Weightman (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 2.

²Ibid.

³Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 1.

⁴Ibid., 2.

⁵David Luebke, discussion with the author, Eugene, OR, April 2000.

⁶Judt, *Past Imperfect*, 4.

of the 1990s collapsed. It should be noted that despite his confident use of 20/20 hindsight, Judt is careful to differentiate his own work from works of “character assassination” that seek merely to point out the perceived moral failures of French intellectuals of the period without explaining their motivations. Indeed, Judt’s work is an intensive analysis of the myriad of factors that lent themselves to the pre-occupation with Communism that typified that postwar intellectual’s political concern as well as condemnations for their conclusions.

While Judt’s work is definitely the foundation (or perhaps counter-point) of this paper, it lacks completely in one kind of analysis: the immanent. Judt is so contemptuous of existentialism that he often puts the words “existentialist” and “existentialism” in quotation marks. He refuses to acknowledge *any* moral or ethical weight inherent in existentialism and dismisses the entire philosophy with his observation that “Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir...and their contemporaries, [were] fiddling with their existential dilemmas while Budapest burned⁷.” It is not the task of this paper to question whether or not existentialism is valid or logical or useful in and of itself. It attempts to critique existentialism, but does so in order to explain the existential ethics that Sartre and Beauvoir created in their major philosophical works. Rather than claiming that existentialism is or is not a valid philosophy, it attempts to address Sartre and Beauvoir’s political positions in the postwar period from the perspective of *their* ethics instead of the straight-forward liberalism with which Judt finally concludes *Past Imperfect*. Judt writes of “the necessary and desirable complexity, plurality, and indeterminacy of political life⁸” in contrast to the intellectual project of creating a “comprehensive theory of the world⁹” that he claims lies (or at least lay) at the heart of French intellectual goals. What Judt does not do is attempt to make sense of the “generation of French intellectuals” by

⁷Ibid, 4.

⁸Ibid., 313.

⁹Ibid., 308.

allowing the possibility that their codes of ethics have a right to legitimacy; in particular existentialism is so beneath him that he can barely be bothered to mention it except as a kind of slur.

This paper is concerned with the politics of Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir from the end of the Second World War until the invasion of Hungary by the Soviet Union in 1956. It is not an attempt at a chronological record; instead it attempts to address the major themes and debates that occurred in and between *Les Temps Modernes*, the journal that Sartre and Beauvoir directed from the end of W.W.II, and the PCF and conceptual Marxism in general. The major focus is that of an internal, immanent critique of Sartre and Beauvoir's political positions juxtaposed with their purely philosophical and ethical works as contained in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*¹⁰ and his famous lecture in *Existentialism and Human Emotions*¹¹ as well as Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity*¹². The question is this: were Sartre and Beauvoir consistent with their own existential ethics in their relationship with Communism? Did they vacillate or were they actually "authentic" in their political stances?

This paper seeks to explain the context in which Sartre and Beauvoir struggled with the political questions of their day in the French fourth republic, a time and place that does indeed seem "far, far removed" from modern political dialogue. It also attempts to examine existentialism itself, in particular Sartre's concept of "bad faith," that a clear framework against which to judge the existentialists might emerge. Finally, it tries to hold up Sartre and Beauvoir against their own code of ethics.

¹⁰Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Robert Denoon Cumming (New York: Vintage Books, 1965.)

¹¹Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, trans. Bernard Frechtman and Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1994.)

¹²Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1996.)

A few particularities and problems should be noted. While many philosophers since Friedrich Nietzsche have been labeled as “existentialists,” few have embraced the term actively. Two of the most readily available examples of philosophers who rejected the assertion that they were existentialists are the German philosopher Heidegger and Sartre and Beauvoir’s contemporary and sometimes-friend Albert Camus. Camus in particular is an interesting counterpart to Sartre and Beauvoir since for several years following W.W.II he was an ideological fellow traveler of the existentialists and was only excluded from direct involvement with the publishing of *Les Temps Modernes (LSM)* by his own journal, *Combat*. Camus wrote some of the seminal works of existential literature including *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*. Regardless, Camus did not accept the moniker of existentialist and his break with Sartre after he published *L’Homme Revolte* in 1951 has become a subject of significant scholastic attention in itself. This paper acknowledges Camus and his arguments against Sartre’s positions (Sartre himself noted the significance and power of Camus even while rejecting his positions¹³) but it does not focus on Camus himself.

A significant problem also emerges in the dichotomy between Sartre and Beauvoir. Both began their intellectual careers as students of literature. Sartre was notoriously divorced from “reality” and immersed in books as a young man; “everything...conspired to precipitate him into literature; that is--according to his later opinion--out of life, out of reality...Through literature he would become the ‘other,’ the glorious and immortal writer¹⁴.” The experience of W.W.II catapulted both Sartre and Beauvoir out of their complacency and they felt compelled to enter into an active relationship with life itself. As Beauvoir wrote “Then, suddenly, History burst over me,

¹³Michel-Antoine Burnier, *Choice of Action: The French Existentialists on the Political Front Line*, trans. Bernard Murchland (New York: Random House 1968), 176.

¹⁴Alain D. Ranwez, *Jean-Paul Sartre’s Les Temps Modernes: a Literary History 1945-1952* (Troy, NY: Whitston Publishing, 1981), 15.

and I dissolved into fragments. I woke to find myself scattered over the four quarters of the globe, linked by every nerve in me to each and every other individual¹⁵.”

While both Sartre and Beauvoir struggled to engage themselves following W.W.II, and it is this very engagement that this paper seeks to study, it was Sartre who was responsible for the lion’s share of politically focused writing in *Les Temps Modernes*. Sartre was the director on the board of *LSM* while Beauvoir was in charge of literature. As such, Beauvoir wrote less that pertained directly to the political situation of her time; her influence in Sartre’s writing is undeniable, but most of what this paper addresses directly comes from Sartre’s pen. This is not to say that Beauvoir was of secondary significance to their existential writings and projects; it was Beauvoir who undoubtedly provides the most lucid and well-reasoned account of exactly what existential ethics are in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as contrasted to Sartre’s sometimes wordy and unclear work in *Being and Nothingness*. It is also Beauvoir who explains *why* she and Sartre acted as they did on many occasions. It should be noted, then, that this paper addresses more of Sartre’s political writings simply because there were more of them that pertained directly to the questions of Marxism, Communism, and their relationship to existentialism.

¹⁵Simone de Beauvoir, quoted in Burnier, *Choice of Action*, 7.

CHAPTER II

The basic position of existentialism, according to Sartre, is that existence precedes essence. This means that the essential nature of a person, its “soul” or defining characteristics, do not exist prior to the individual’s existence in the world. Sartre and Beauvoir acknowledge the existence of values, traits, and characteristics but they claim that these things exist in the world not unto themselves or by being introduced by a higher power, but only in the choices and actions of human beings. Christian theology claims that God the Creator starts with an idea of what a human is and then creates the human--the idea precedes the creation even if the idea is somehow embodied in the “image” of God. As Sartre describes the prevailing ideology, “The individual man is the realization of a certain concept of the divine intelligence¹⁶.” Likewise, while it is human action (and even human thought) that either condemns or elevates the individual’s spirit or soul, the existence of good and evil, of heaven and hell, precedes the individual and it is into the moral structure of the universe that the individual is placed by God.

Similarly, the Platonic concept of the universe claims that divine Forms outside of the realm of the human create the ethical building blocks of reality and the concrete world experienced in day-to-day life is only a sad flickering shadow. Later philosophers assigned different status to the supposed realm of the divine versus that of the human. Rousseau claimed that the divine spark existed in the individual and that the principle danger to the spirit was the corruption of modern life. Kant maintained that Reason was the value in which perfection and Truth were open to humanity and by relying on Reason and rejecting the chaotic impulses of instinct and nature the individual could hope to

¹⁶Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 14.

achieve true spiritual autonomy. Weber diagnosed the modern world with a serious spiritual ailment in that modernity had destroyed the possibility that the individual could hope to understand the world in all its myriad complexity--he claimed that the only meaningful action a person could take in the context of modernity was to understand a single specialized vocation.

While the philosophies of the early modern and modern periods differed in many regards from one another, one consistent factor remained true to them all: the values which made life worthwhile and meaningful existed on an elevated spiritual plane. Even if the values in question were distinctly human, there was something divine implicit in Rousseau's individualism, Kant's Reason, and even in Weber's nostalgia for a time when humanity could strive for some kind of holistic understanding of the world. As Beauvoir writes "As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt [the] tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it¹⁷." Existentialism is, among other things, an attempt to "unmask" the nature of human reality and to explain how human life and action can be meaningful without having to resort to claims of absolute, extra-human values.

Existentialism rejects the notion of divine values completely. The only world to the existentialist is the world that we perceive through our senses, however flawed or biased that perception may be. Likewise, values are predicated only on the actions of humans. They can be codified as values and discussed as values but their origins are firmly rooted in the world of the human. The specific existential concepts that this paper is especially concerned with--those of authenticity versus bad faith--are born out of this idea. As Sartre writes "when the existentialist writes about a coward, he says that this coward is responsible for his cowardice. He's not like that because he has a cowardly

¹⁷Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 7.

heart or lung or brain; he's not like that on account of his physiological make-up; but he's like that because he has made himself a coward by his acts¹⁸." It is clear that the value or state of being of cowardice exists to the existentialist--Sartre does not retreat from referring to someone as a coward--but that cowardice and cowardly people exist only as they are manifested in the actions of humans.

The implications of the idea that values are born of actions are numerous and both Sartre and Beauvoir attempt to outline them, most succinctly in Sartre's lecture *Existentialism* itself and Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Sartre claims that "if existence really does precede essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him¹⁹." This concept, that of the responsibility that goes hand in hand with choices and actions, is absolutely central to existentialism and from it some of the more problematic assertions of Sartre and Beauvoir's arise. Both Sartre and Beauvoir claim that the individual's choices are not atomistic; they do not reflect only on the individual making choices but on the whole of humanity and indeed, on the whole world. It is worthwhile to trace the steps in the process that arrives at this conclusion.

First, says Sartre, there needs to be a clear dividing line between atheistic existentialism (in which category he and Beauvoir fall) and Christian existentialism. Particularly noteworthy in the latter category is Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard claimed that it was useless to attempt to arrive at a proof for the existence of God through rational means--God can not be proved by science, math, or even art or literature. Instead, Kierkegaard stated that the absolute fundamental of being a Christian was a leap of faith in which one must simply have faith that God exists totally unsupported by any kind of

¹⁸Sartre, *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 16.

rational proof. Sartre accepts all this; he simply chooses not make the leap of faith and instead makes a sort of leap of faith of his own that God does *not* exist--neither the Christian nor the atheistic existentialist can prove or disprove the existence of God but their individual positions, the essential ambiguity of the situation, provide the foundation from which the rest of their respective conclusions are drawn. As Sartre says "Atheistic existentialism...states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept, and that this being is man...there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it²⁰."

The next step in the logical chain is that the state in which man exists, undefined by an outside force or an internal order imposed from somewhere else, is both totally liberating and utterly terrifying in its freedom. Sartre claims that "The existentialist...thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with him...Nowhere is it written that the Good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because the fact is we are on a plane where there are only men²¹." Beauvoir describes the terrifying and at the same time exhilarating implications of this attitude in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. She writes "The drama of original choice is that it goes on moment by moment for an entire lifetime...It is in this moment--a moment which extends throughout his whole adult life--that the attitude of man is placed on a moral plane...What is called vitality, sensitivity, and intelligence are not ready-made qualities, but a way of casting oneself into the world and of disclosing being²²" To the existentialist, every single choice made by an adult (Beauvoir takes pains to differentiate between the position of adulthood and that of childhood, claiming that the child finds in the adult world a source of outside values that

²⁰Ibid., 15.

²¹Ibid., 22.

²²Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 41.

are near enough to absolute as to preclude the difficulty of choice as it exists for the adult) is made in a spirit of freedom and at the same time in a place of total isolation from empirical standards.

Beauvoir claims that “From the very beginning, existentialism defined itself as a philosophy of ambiguity²³.” She describes how humans find themselves in the position of conscious thought and action and yet their goals seem ultimately arbitrary and their justifications made up. She quotes Sartre as having said that humanity is “a useless passion” and concedes that life does not provide any way for a human to escape the essential ambiguity of her situation. Likewise, Sartre notes that “we find no values or commands to turn to which legitimize our conduct. So, in the bright realm of values, we have no excuse behind us, nor justification before us. We are alone, with no excuses²⁴.” Thus, the essential position from which the positive or pro-active aspects of existentialism arise seem essentially negative. While both Sartre and Beauvoir explicitly refer to values as such, they also claim that values exist only as they are manifested in concrete human action. People cannot aspire to act in accordance with a value, rather that value arises out of their actions. If someone acts in a courageous manner, they have projected courage into the world but it was not, regardless of their intentions, because they acted in accordance with something they thought was courage. Both Sartre and Beauvoir later go on to claim that setting up a value as something to follow and act in accordance with is in fact a lie and a manifestation of bad faith, since the value is totally ephemeral in itself and relies on human action to “disclose” it to the world.

One of the consistent criticisms of existentialism from its inception has been that it allows no possibility for meaningful action, since there is nothing absolute to appeal to. This is the essential quandary that Beauvoir and Sartre wrestle with, and their conclusions

²³Ibid., 9.

²⁴Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 23.

are the standard against which this paper attempts to hold them accountable. The essential position that Sartre and Beauvoir offer to counter the dark paradigm existentialism seems to present is that while existentialism does preclude the possibility of extra-human absolute values, it allows the possibility for reality and accomplishment to happen in a strictly human sphere and in a strictly human *manner*. Sartre writes “by existentialism we mean a doctrine which makes human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity²⁵.” Beauvoir goes on to claim that the very act of accepting humanity’s position in the world and choosing to act is in itself the greatest courage and meaning that the individual can hope for. “[The individual] can...affirm himself as a positive existence...To attain his truth, man must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being but, on the contrary, accept the task of realizing it²⁶.” There is an essential *honesty* that Sartre and Beauvoir allude to, one in which the individual enjoys a sort of ethical triumph simply in acknowledging the lack of absolute values in the world and choosing to act regardless. This was Camus’ conclusion in *The Myth of Sisyphus* as well; by choosing and affirming the fate he was assigned to, Camus claimed, “one must imagine Sisyphus happy²⁷.”

While this conclusion seems acceptable on one level--since the only empirical, absolute reality Sartre and Beauvoir are willing to accept is one of ambiguity itself, choosing and affirming this ambiguity at least places the individual on a parallel course with the nature of life--it is also somewhat unsatisfying. The philosophical works of both Sartre and Beauvoir are full of references to this lack of satisfaction--Sartre refers to it as “nausea” and both allude to the temptation of giving in to despair when confronted

²⁵Ibid., 10.

²⁶Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 13.

²⁷Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 91.

with the emptiness inherent in a world without empirical standards. The solution, they claim, is to be found in the freedom that describes and defines the human condition. Ironically, ambiguity becomes the absolute from which the ethics of existentialism arise and *freedom* itself is the value against which humanity can hope to judge their actions and the actions of others. How is this possible, however, since it has already been established that values have no origin outside of human action? To discern the answer Sartre and Beauvoir offer a further analysis of the responsibility inherent in human action and of the centrality of freedom itself in the human experience.

One of the accusations leveled against existentialism is that it can be used as an excuse for capriciousness--without values, why shouldn't people simply do as they please? As Beauvoir writes "if man is free to define for himself the conditions of a life which is valid in his own eyes, can he not choose whatever he likes and act however he likes?" The answer, she claims, is that human life is situated in a context of opposition to this capriciousness. "Man is abandoned on the earth, because his acts are definitive, absolute engagements. He bears the responsibility for a world which not the work of a strange power, but of himself...A God can pardon, efface, and compensate. But if God does not exist, man's faults are inexpiable...One can not start by saying that our earthly destiny *has* or *has not* importance. It is up to man to make it important to be a man, and he alone can feel his success or failure²⁸." Notably, Beauvoir makes direct reference to "absolute engagements." In a strange way, since human reality is the only reality, human acts are in fact absolute. They are the end of the ethical line and the definition of ethical action itself.

It is this paradox that lies at the heart of existential ethics: human acts are absolute unto themselves and thus there is an incredible amount of responsibility attached to every action. It is here that the most vital and yet problematic step in the existential chain of

²⁸Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 16.

logic emerges: since human action is the source of values and indeed there can not be any other source of values, every action carries with it the most weighty ethical implications for *every other person on the planet*. Sartre writes “when we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men²⁹.” Why is this so? Sartre replies that “In creating the man that we want to be, there is not a single one of our acts which does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be...Thus, our responsibility is much greater than we might have supposed, because it involves all mankind.” Sartre offers a concrete example: if a working man chooses to be a member of a Christian trade union instead of being a communist, he is choosing “resignation³⁰” for not only himself, but the entire world (or at least the entire world of working men.)

To a certain extent this seems necessary and even obvious; if values arise only out of human action, it follows also that they cannot be prevented from doing so. If an individual chews gum, he or she implies to the world that chewing gum is a good thing to do. Or, to refer to perhaps the most serious ethical quandary of modern American childhood, if all of your friends jump off a bridge, they are choosing the value of jumping off bridges for everyone, you included. This is perhaps the most difficult existential concept. Sartre and Beauvoir do not allow for the possibility that a person can make a choice simply for themselves without involving the rest of humanity. Sartre describes the necessary “anguish” that arises out of this situation. “The man who involves himself and who realizes that he is not only the person he chooses to be, but also a law-maker who is, at the same time, choosing all mankind as well as himself, can not help escape the feeling of his total and deep responsibility³¹.” Even more radically, Sartre suggests that “A man who lies and makes excuses for himself by saying ‘not everybody does that,’ is someone

²⁹Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 16.

³⁰Ibid., 17.

³¹Ibid., 18.

with an uneasy conscience, because the act of lying implies that a universal value is conferred upon the lie³².”

The implication is thus that not only do values arise out of human actions, but that values are in fact *universal*. In an incredible paradox, Sartre and Beauvoir claim that it is out of the total isolation of each person that the total universality of individual action is born. Humans are both totally atomistic, adrift in a world without meaning or absolute values, and tied together with an intimacy as unbreakable as their isolation. As Sartre says “every man ought to say to himself, ‘Am I really the kind of man who has the right to act in such a way that humanity might guide itself by my actions?’ And if he does not say that to himself, he is masking his anguish³³.” Humanity is thus stuck between a cosmic rock and a universal hard place: no one can look beyond themselves for empirical guidance yet every action carries the utmost importance as universally applicable values are born. In a way, this is a restatement of a very simple ethical rule: one should not act in a manner which would cause harm if everyone did it. The problem is that both Sartre and Beauvoir have more intimately focused on the human than basically any other philosophy has dared to and yet totally removed the myriad of peculiarities of circumstances in the vast universe of choices. Their response to such accusations, however, is that the situation is indeed terrifying, that it does inspire “anguish” and yet that the individual has no choice but to act within its framework.

The last step in the existential logic in which humanity must live arises out of this model of the human condition. The one value that *does* exist to provide guidance, and indeed the one value that provides a moral option for the universally applicable human choice itself, is freedom. Sartre writes “When I declare that freedom in every concrete circumstance can have no other aim than to want itself, if man has once become aware

³²Ibid., 19.

³³Ibid., 20.

that in his forlornness he imposes values, he can no longer want but one thing, and that is freedom, as the basis of all values...the ultimate meaning of the acts of honest men is the quest for freedom as such...And in wanting freedom we discover that it depends entirely on the freedom of others, and that the freedom of others depends on ours³⁴.” Sartre claims, in essence, just as the honesty inherent in accepting the ambiguity of reality is an ethical act, so is not only accepting total freedom but in fact fighting for it. The bulk of Beauvoir’s *Ethics of Ambiguity* describes a detailed program by which the various ways in which people try to delude themselves, avoiding the essential freedom of choice in their lives. Beauvoir writes “one can choose not to will himself free. In laziness, heedlessness, capriciousness, cowardice, impatience, one contests the meaning of the project at the very moment that one defines it³⁵.” By this, Beauvoir means that only by pursuing one’s goals in a spirit of earnestness and honesty is one acting in an ethical manner.

Beauvoir goes on to lay out the existential ethical program directly. “The truth is that...freedom...must, by giving itself a particular content, aim by means of it at an end which is nothing else but precisely the free movement of existence³⁶.” Beauvoir claims that it is through the pursuit of specific “projects,” again in a spirit of honesty and earnestness, that the individual hopes to find meaning in life. Furthermore, the only really honest projects are those that realize the freedom to choose freely for the individual and ultimately for the rest of humanity. Later she writes “truth is found in another form when we say that freedom can not will itself without aiming at an open future...Only the freedom of others keeps each one of us from hardening in the absurdity of facticity. And if we are to believe the Christian myth of creation, God himself was in agreement of this

³⁴Ibid., 46.

³⁵Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 25.

³⁶Ibid., 29.

point with the existentialist doctrine since...’He had such respect for man that He created him free³⁷.’”

This goal of freedom is again problematic. The most basic existential position is that humanity is, in fact, free. Indeed, the really radical aspect of existential philosophy is that it claims that it allows only freedom itself to be an absolute while all other conditions of life are qualified by this freedom in the context of human choice. The difficulty with this position arises in that there is a certain incongruity inherent in the idea not that humanity is free or even that the denial of this essential freedom is dishonest, but that every person *must* strive to work for freedom for every other person. Basically, the reasoning behind this choice is that working for freedom allows everyone the chance to approach her life in a spirit of honesty as well, so that in the ideal existential situation every person would make choices informed by honest appraisals of whatever situation he or she was facing and with a deep-seated respect for the freedom of others. As Beauvoir writes “The characteristic feature of all ethics is to consider human life as a game that can be won or lost and to teach man the means of winning³⁸.” Sartre and Beauvoir do not offer a meaningful hope or goal for humanity besides “winning” at the game of life by embracing freedom as the only absolute, human characteristic. Since humanity is indeed “condemned to be free³⁹” we return to the Sisyphean image of triumph: humanity finds meaning and happiness in life by embracing its fate actively. There is, according to Sartre and Beauvoir, no other path to a meaningful and fulfilling life.

This is the essential existential position. What remains to be discussed before attempting to examine the specifics of the politics of post-W.W.II France is an examination of ways in which humans attempt to reject their freedom or hide from it. As outlined above, one of the essential moral triumphs possible to humans condemned to be

³⁷Ibid., 71.

³⁸Ibid., 23.

³⁹Ibid.

free, claims Beauvoir, is to simply accept the ugly truth that every choice is made in a state of absolute freedom and total responsibility. Along with this essential truth, adds Sartre, is the fact that only freedom itself is an adequate ethical standard for the honest, authentic person to center their actions and thoughts around. Both Sartre and Beauvoir level some of their more virulent attacks against attempts first to deny the basic context of human freedom in which every person exists and second to try and set up standards other than freedom as absolutes. Those people that erect artificial empirical standards do so in a spirit of “bad faith” or in Beauvoir’s words they embrace a “spirit of seriousness.” It is in their analysis of bad faith and seriousness that Sartre and Beauvoir expose themselves to charges of hypocrisy in their later political stances.

Bad faith, writes Sartre, is simply “a lie to oneself⁴⁰.” Sartre examines in detail the philosophical quandary presented in lying to oneself in that, as he notes, “the duality of the deceiver and the deceived does not exist here,” in opposition to normal lying in which the liar is aware of the truth that they are attempting to conceal. Sartre concludes that even though bad faith seems somehow impossible, since “the total translucency of consciousness” implies that a person living in bad faith should somehow *know* that they’re lying to themselves at some level, bad faith itself “presents nonetheless an autonomous and durable form. It can even be the normal aspect of life for a very great number of people. A person can *live* in bad faith⁴¹.”

Sartre goes on to provide three examples of bad faith: a woman on a date who attempts to avoid physical contact through feints of conversation, a waiter in a cafe who goes through his work like an automaton, and the case of the individual who is simply “sad” and yet being able to adopt a false front of cheerfulness in the event of visitors. Each example is meant by Sartre to reveal some of the different “modes of being⁴²” that

⁴⁰Sartre, *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, 138.

⁴¹Ibid., 140.

⁴²Ibid., 154.

bad faith embodies. The first is directed at those who attempt to reduce the world to abstractions rather than dealing with the real blood-and-guts reality of life (which was, incidentally, the accusation leveled at Camus' *Le Homme Revolte* by *Les Temps Modernes* which led to Camus' and Sartre's historic break⁴³.) The woman in Sartre's example tries to avoid having to accept or reject the propositions of her date by continually turning the conversation to abstractions and delaying the matter at hand. The second example is that of a waiter who plays at "being"⁴⁴ a waiter in the same sense that a machine is a machine or an animal an animal--instead of realizing his freedom and approaching his task with earnestness and good faith the waiter tries to hide himself in a series of mechanical gestures. Finally, the last example is Sartre's attempt to expose the bad faith implicit in simple emotions or moods. Sartre points out that a "sad" person knows at some level that he can choose to act in a different way, that the sadness he feels is a continuous process that must be realized continually. As Sartre says, "there is no inertia in consciousness"⁴⁵, i.e. emotions like actions must be recreated every moment actively. Trying to feel something just because one felt that way before, claims Sartre, is an act of bad faith.

Sartre's examples of bad faith are deeply unsatisfying in some ways. The example of the woman and the waiter each provide valuable examples of existentialist thought in action in that abstractions are hollow in the face of concrete reality and humans are in a position where they *must* choose their actions even if they'd rather think they were trapped in a particular position imposing certain actions from outside. Likewise, the example of sadness is meant to illustrate the total freedom of the human condition; each person can choose his or her own mode of being and ultimately can choose to be happy if

⁴³Bernard Murchland, *Sartre and Camus--The Anatomy of a Quarrel*, in Burnier, *Choice of Action*, 176.

⁴⁴Sartre, *Philosophy of Sartre*, 152.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 154.

he or she approaches life in good faith. The problems arising from Sartre's examples are that they allow no sympathy for peculiarities of circumstance. The pressure the woman feels having at having a stranger making overt advances and not being sure about how she feels about it yet, the exhaustion and ambivalence of the waiter after a long day in the cafe and the endless parade of demanding customers, and the simple fact that sometimes consciousness, or at least the feelings that contribute to consciousness *do* have a sort of "inertia" is totally glossed over by Sartre.

The more satisfying and better explained examples of bad faith are to be found in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Beauvoir outlines the most serious ethical error as refusing to accept the essential ambiguity of the human situation and furthermore refusing to accept and struggle for the freedom of oneself and others. She notes that "the trick of dishonesty permits stopping at any moment whatsoever...all errors are possible...motivated by the anguish he [man] feels in the face of his freedom⁴⁶." Where Sartre offered only slightly puzzling abstracts, Beauvoir claims that when an adult refuses to accept his or her freedom by setting up outside principles as absolutes, he or she lives in bad faith. The most poignant example of bad faith Beauvoir provides is that of "seriousness." The serious man, Beauvoir claims, is the man who sets up some kind of outside force or moral system, be it political, religious, social, philosophical, or ethical and treats it as the standard and system he will live by. It becomes an absolute in his life. She writes "He dissimulates his subjectivity under the shield of rights which emanate from the ethical universe recognized by him; he is no longer a man, but a father, a boss, a member of the Christian Church or the Communist Party⁴⁷."

Beauvoir's indictment of the means by which individuals attempt to hide from their freedom does not end with the serious man but it is in the "spirit of seriousness" that

⁴⁶Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 34.

⁴⁷Ibid., 48.

we find the real benchmark against which to hold her and Sartre. Beauvoir does not actually use the phrase “bad faith” at any time in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* but it seems clear that “seriousness” is synonymous with bad faith, or that seriousness is the most commonplace and significant manifestation of bad faith. Sartre struggles with the fact that the very existence of bad faith seems to contradict itself and offers no real conclusion in *Being and Nothingness*. It is Beauvoir that explains, with the example of seriousness, what the prevalent form of bad faith really is.

The political ethics of existentialism that emerge out of the writing of Sartre and Beauvoir thus seem to be those that reject any system or belief *a priori* and insist instead that all politics must recognize the essential freedom of humankind and the individual and indeed, to be an active force in the liberation of all people from artificial restraints. Every action must be informed by a desire to realize concrete freedom and both Sartre and Beauvoir insist that at no time is it possible for a situation to be so spirit-crushing that the individual cannot struggle against it (Beauvoir notes succinctly that in the most “radically blocked off” situations “Revolt can then be achieved only in the definitive rejection of the imposed situation, in suicide⁴⁸.”)

This paper will now attempt to examine the political climate of the postwar period in France to better explain why Marxism was at the center of much of the dialogue of the existentialists’ politics. It will then seek to investigate the actual positions of Sartre and Beauvoir concerning Marxism and events like the disclosure of the existence of the Soviet prison camps and especially the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. Finally it will juxtapose the politics of *Les Temps Modernes* and the code of ethics that its authors had already codified.

⁴⁸Ibid., 32.

CHAPTER III

The Fourth Republic of France arose as a response to the occupation of the Nazis and the collaborationist Vichy Regime following W.W.II. The experience of the war left deep psychological scars on the French political and social landscape. As Gordon Wright notes in *France in Modern Times*, “Never before in modern history had France been so prostrate, so stunned and broken in spirit. Defeat the French had known, in 1814, 1815, 1871. But this was far more than defeat: it was utter humiliation, almost too deep for any Frenchman to comprehend⁴⁹.” Despite De Gaulle’s blustering and the symbolic significance of the Free French forces that played their (strategically insignificant) part in the liberation of France, gone was the confident assumption that many had held before the war that France was one of the great powers in the world and would remain so for the foreseeable future.

During the Vichy regime and the occupation there arose a language that was to dominate French political dialogue following the war. Central to the narrative of French politics in the postwar era was the sense of struggle, of the necessity of militant solidarity against oppressive outside forces, and ultimately of *resistance*. The actual French resistance, like the Free French forces, may not have enjoyed any stunning strategic victories during the occupation and at no time was the Vichy regime really threatened from within until the Allied armies landed in Normandy. Importantly, however, the resistance lent a sense of moral clarity to post-war France. There had been those who had stood unequivocally against the *evil* manifested in the occupying German armies and the Vichy regime that kow-towed to Hitler. Even though the majority of French citizens had

⁴⁹Gordon Wright, *France in Modern Times*, 5th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 382.

nothing to do with active resistance, as Wright points out there were thousands who did. “More than a hundred thousand suffered deportation to concentration camps, from which only forty thousand returned, and the story of the underground is replete with accounts of real heroism⁵⁰.” The climate of the times was thus a strange blend of both the humiliation of total defeat and the desire to re-create France informed by the commitment to action of the Resistance. France had to be re-made better than it had been before the war and it had to be made strong enough that the kind of defeat it had suffered could never happen again.

Sartre himself spent nine months in a prison camp as a POW and then promptly joined the resistance when he was let out. He published plays even as a prisoner (notably *Baronia*, a thinly veiled call for resistance hidden behind a Biblical story⁵¹) that were implicitly anti-German and full of the spirit of resistance. When he was released he formed the intellectual activist group *Socialisme et Liberté* along with Simone de Beauvoir, among others. Their purpose was “not only [to] supply information for the Resistance but also aspire to prepare the future, because ‘the left would need a doctrine⁵².’” It was in this formative phase that Sartre and Beauvoir began their attempts to provide the intellectual and philosophical foundation for the left. During the war this was in the name of the Resistance. Like many of Sartre and Beauvoir’s overtly political groups, *SL* collapsed without accomplishing anything concrete. That being noted, however, the existence of *SL* and the wartime pro-Resistance publications of Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s were significant factors in establishing their postwar prestige. It was also during the war that Sartre and Beauvoir formed significant links with the Communists, who welcomed their contribution to their clandestine publications.

⁵⁰Ibid., 394.

⁵¹Burnier, 10.

⁵²Beauvoir, quoted in Ranwez, Ibid., 17.

With the end of the Vichy regime in August 1944 a wave of retribution washed over the French landscape. Lynch mobs murdered many of the overt collaborationists, especially the members of the secret police who had hounded the Resistance during the war. The mood of the nation was a strange blend of optimism, euphoria, and deep-seated anxiety about the future. One of the most notable trends in the postwar political climate was the continuation of the language of resistance even after the total defeat of the Nazis. “To those Frenchmen who had led the fight against Vichy and the Germans...the time had come for a drastic overhaul⁵³.” Beauvoir wrote “I did not want to hear the voices of people who had consented to the death of millions of Jews and Resistance members; I did not want to find their name in any publication side by side with my own. We had said: ‘We shall not forget’; I was not forgetting that⁵⁴.” The militancy of the Resistance language carried over into the postwar period and Sartre and Beauvoir, among others, addressed political issues with the same urgency. The political climate was even more charged by the fact that there was a (at least perceived) vacuum where the Right had once been. The prestige of the far right was totally shattered, their dreams of an authoritarian state having been realized in the Vichy regime and the results having proved disastrous. The French Communist Party (PCF) emerged from the war with an unprecedentedly powerful voice, having been the major organized force of resistance during the war and having orchestrated the most effective resistance activities.

It was the idea not only of resistance, but of revolution, that brought many of the French intelligentsia together following liberation. Sartre and Beauvoir had been notoriously ambivalent towards politics in the 1930s, but with the occupation they realized that they (and their philosophies) were not on a higher plane than the blood-and-guts reality of politics. “It was necessary for History, hidden and distant for

⁵³Wright, 396.

⁵⁴Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1965), 20.

those who were not consciously making it, to irrupt suddenly into life...It took the war to make the future existentialists see reality⁵⁵.” After doing their part in the Resistance, mostly by publishing pro-resistance plays and essays, the existentialists committed themselves to political action, convinced now that their distaste for politics from the pre-war years amounted to bad faith. Beauvoir noted the power the Resistance still held in the post-war period among the intellegensia despite the fact that, with the defeat of the Nazis, it had no real place in the political landscape. “The word Resistance, although it had lost its political power, still meant something among the intellectuals; when they found themselves side by side...they were able to affirm their solidarity⁵⁶.”

As Judt points out “Having rediscovered their faith in certain truths...the French intelligentsia were in a collective hurry to see these applied...extrapolating from the Resistance years, the only experience of collective action most of them had ever known, unaffiliated intellectuals looked upon inaction as the worst of all options...they saw revolution, in this case the continuation and the completion of the experience and objectives of the Resistance, as the only solution⁵⁷.” The “truth” the existentialists had discovered during the war was that they, like everyone, were bound to the world concretely and quietism was not an ethical option. Having collaborated actively with the Communists during the Resistance and accepting some of the basic tenets of Marxism, Sartre and Beauvoir emerged from the war convinced that existentialism was the logical compatible doctrine for the Communist party.

The euphoria of victory faded quickly after the final defeat of Germany. Wright points out that de Gaulle “angrily resigned his post and left the task of rejuvenation to lesser men⁵⁸” sixteen months after liberation. The Fourth Republic’s constitution was

⁵⁵Burnier, 7.

⁵⁶Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 34.

⁵⁷Judt, 36.

⁵⁸Wright, 396.

not in place until October of 1946 when 36% of French voters approved it in a referendum--32% opposed it and 32% didn't bother to vote⁵⁹. It was in this period that the existentialists started treating revolution as the concrete goal towards which their philosophy naturally aimed. Judt claims that Sartre's concept of revolution "was a categorical imperative...It was an a priori existential requirement. Revolution would not only alter the world, it constituted the act of permanent re-creation of our collective situation...In short, action [of a revolutionary nature] is what sustains the authenticity of the individual⁶⁰."

Along with the tide of dismay and increasing cynicism about the still brand-new Fourth Republic was thus a demand, on the part of many of the elite French intellectuals (Sartre and Beauvoir included) and the PCF, for a new order in France that would stand as the antithesis to the Vichy regime. Beauvoir and Sartre had always included intellectual activities, especially writing, as an *action* that contributed or endangered the quest for existential authenticity as much as any other action. It was in this spirit then that they sought retribution in the harshest terms for the intellectual collaborators of the Vichy era. As Sartre wrote, "literature is no innocent song that can accommodate all regimes, but asks in itself the political question: to write is to assert freedom for all men⁶¹." Likewise, Beauvoir claimed that "I attach an enormous importance to words...There are words as murderous as gas chambers⁶²."

The Ordinance of 26 December 1944 allowed prosecution and punishment of the death penalty for the crime of "Collaboration." This ordinance was obviously retroactive but it existed to satisfy the demand for punishment that many French saw as the necessary cleansing purge that would serve as the first step to a reformed France. The numbers of

⁵⁹Ibid., 402.

⁶⁰Judt, 40.

⁶¹Sartre quoted in Judt, 56.

⁶²Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 22.

people executed for collaboration was surprisingly low; 7,000 people were sentenced to death but only 800 were ever actually executed⁶³. Sartre and Beauvoir were in full support of the persecution of intellectual collaborators. Notably, the writer Robert Brasillach was actually executed for treason despite the fact that his participation was strictly intellectual. He had certainly written in support of the Nazis and he was a notorious anti-Semite but he had never done anything besides write and hob-knob with Vichy officials and Nazis. Beauvoir justified his death in accordance with existentialism; Brassilach had to assume responsibility for his actions. Beauvoir wrote “under his editorship, the staff of *Je Suis Partout* denounced people, specified victims, and urged the Vichy Government to enforce the wearing of the yellow star.” In one of her most poignant statements concerning the purge, she noted that “Vengeance is pointless, but certain men did not have a place in the world we sought to construct⁶⁴.” The existentialists, like so many in France at the time, wanted to build a new France free of the remnants of the Vichy debacle.

As France pulled away from the immediate aftermath of W.W.II the Fourth Republic proved considerably more effective at governing than the (widely despised) Third Republic had. Despite widespread disgust with its institutions and dismay over the continuation of difficult shaky coalition governments, the Fourth republic nonetheless survived the cynicism and lasted for fourteen turbulent years. The most notable, and important in the context of this paper, feature of the Fourth Republic’s political landscape was the pre-eminence of the French Communist Party. As Wright notes “The Communist Party...had managed to create a powerful legend by 1945. No other group had so many martyrs or used them so effectively. The new prestige of the Soviet Union gave added glamour, and they profited as well by the general trend of opinion toward the left⁶⁵.” De

⁶³Judt, 59.

⁶⁴Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 20.

⁶⁵Wright, 399.

Gaulle, the notorious conservative, even signed a twenty-year alliance with the USSR in 1944.

The situation of the PCF was peculiar in that its official position was that of a satellite party of the Soviet Union. Unlike the Socialists, who sought reform but did not affiliate themselves with the dictates of Moscow, the PCF was forced to straddle the difficult fence of official subservience to Russia while remaining distinctly French enough to continue to attract a widespread following. Philip Williams described this situation aptly in *Politics in Post-War France*. “Moscow’s sharp and sudden turns of policy often embarrass its faithful followers, who are required to contradict themselves overnight...the hardened Communist knows that the party line of the moment is merely a means to the true ends, the acquisition of governmental power in his own country and the promotion of the interests of the USSR⁶⁶.” By 1946, with the wartime resistance spirit still strong, there were over 900,000 card-carrying Communists in France⁶⁷.

The PCF was sometimes placed in difficult positions in having to support questionable Soviet actions, but it also enjoyed a certain party discipline that the other parties could not hope for. The Communists were simply the most orthodox, organized, and internally policed party in postwar France. Where other parties were sometimes severely shaken by internal squabbles the Communists remained essentially united by their doctrines. Sometimes this orthodoxy and willingness of the rank-and-file to fall in line with official decrees seemed especially odd; in 1945 the leader of the PCF, Maurice Thorez, “urged his working-class followers to avoid strikes and increase production⁶⁸” to help France pull out of its post-war economic struggle. The Communist party line was naturally revolutionary; its ultimate goal was the overthrow of the French government and

⁶⁶Philip Williams, *Politics in Post-War France: Parties and the Constitution in the Fourth Republic* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1958), 44.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 52.

⁶⁸Wright, 399.

the establishment of a pro-Soviet regime that would eventually result in a proletarian socialist state modeled after the Leninist system. Since this goal was not immediately available, however, the PCF was forced into strange positions trying to toe the party line while remaining patriotically French enough to maintain its following.

The PCF had considerable difficulty in supporting some of the more brutal aspects of the Soviet regime, or at least its fellow-traveling intellectuals did. By 1950 allegations about the existence of Soviet labor camps were widespread, as were reports of show-trials in Moscow and Hungary. Throughout the 1950s intellectuals struggled with the relationship of Marxism and the Soviet Union, and in particular a storm of controversy arose in 1956 with the invasion of Hungary by Soviet troops. Likewise, the popularity and prominence of the PCF peaked in the immediate postwar years; the PCF enjoyed 26% of the vote in 1945, up from 15% in 1936, but by 1951 it was starting to slip⁶⁹. There was significant fear that the PCF would try to take over the government as a whole in a similar manner to the “quasi-legal coup” in Czechoslovakia in 1948. Wright notes that “there was widespread suspicion in France that the party had some such goals in mind, and this suspicion wrecked any prospect of a stable left-wing coalition...Yet so long as centrist governments failed to achieve significant social and economic reforms, the Communist grip on a quarter of the electorate was unlikely to be shaken⁷⁰.”

The final contribution to the contentious political environment of the Fourth Republic was the emergence of significant colonial conflicts. At the end of W.W.II France retained control over Morocco, Algeria, and Indochina, despite the fact that Indochina had been entirely under Japanese control during the war. The British forces that liberated Indochina from the Japanese facilitated the return to French control after the war but the northern half of Vietnam was controlled by nationalist Communist forces

⁶⁹Williams, 53.

⁷⁰Wright, 404.

under the direction of Ho Chi Minh. Negotiations between Ho Chi Minh and the French government collapsed after 1946 and a disastrous war ensued, with the North Vietnamese forces receiving support from China and committing themselves to the conflict even if they were to lose ten men to every one they slew (Ho Chi Minh's prophetic comment to a French acquaintance in 1946⁷¹.) In addition to Indochina serious problems began brewing in Morocco and Algeria and it was a French army rebellion in Algeria in 1958 that brought about the end of the Fourth Republic.

Throughout the period from the end of W.W.II until 1956 (when the Soviet Union invaded Hungary), then, France existed in a highly charged political climate. The language of resistance lived on long after the total defeat of the Nazis and the Vichy regime. Even though there was widespread dissatisfaction with the political status quo, the Fourth Republic's governing coalitions of centrist parties tried to hold themselves together while the PCF sat in the wings toeing the Soviet party line. As the USSR tightened its grip on the "people's democracies" of eastern Europe the USA stockpiled nuclear weapons and in the 1950s was temporarily swept up in McCarythism. France was no longer the world power it had been before W.W.II and instead found itself embroiled in colonial disasters. It was on this conflicted playing field that Sartre and Beauvoir offered their insights and their condemnations of the status quo. The next section of this paper will attempt to trace the major themes of the peculiar alliance of Sartre and Beauvoir and Marxism.

⁷¹Ibid., 407.

CHAPTER IV

This section seeks to trace the major exchanges between Sartre, Beauvoir, and world Communism in the postwar period. It follows a basic chronological construction and focuses primarily on Sartre's political writings in *Les Temps Modernes* and Beauvoir's commentary in her autobiography, *Force of Circumstance*. It attempts to provide a narrative tracing the vacillating degree to which Sartre and Beauvoir lived up to their existential ethics in their political positions over the period in question but the final analyses are left until the last section of this paper.

In 1948 Sartre wrote that "the basic idea of existentialism is that even in the most crushing situations, the most difficult circumstances, man is free. Man is never powerless except when he is persuaded that he is and the responsibility of man is immense because he becomes what he decides to be⁷²." What differentiates this statement from the ones earlier in this paper is that Sartre was writing here in defense of the compatibility of Marxism and existentialism, a compatibility that he insisted not only existed, but was in fact necessary and natural. Both existentialism and Marxism, Sartre claimed, were revolutionary systems with the same goal: the liberation of humanity. The compatibility of existentialism and Marxism was widely contested at the time by PCF intellectual figures as much as anyone else, and the PCF provided some of the harshest rebukes and attacks on Sartre coming from anywhere. Nonetheless, the period from the end of W.W.II until 1956 was one in which Sartre and Beauvoir carried on a lengthy and shifting alliance with the PCF and the Soviet Union.

⁷²Sartre quoted in Mark Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 126.

While Sartre and Beauvoir had certainly been “leftists” before the war, they were also notoriously apathetic about politics in general. Sartre had once remarked that he thought rallies and slogans were “pointless propaganda⁷³” and both he and Beauvoir were thoroughly immersed in literature and philosophy, rather than political analysis, before the war. With the onset of “History” embodied in Sartre’s imprisonment and both his and Beauvoir’s newfound place as resisters they found themselves searching for a political doctrine that they could support. Beauvoir wrote of Sartre in the midst of the war “[He] was thinking a good deal about the postwar period; he had firmly made up his mind to hold aloof from politics no longer. His new morality was based on the notion of ‘authenticity,’ and he was determined to make a practical application of it to himself. It required every man to shoulder the responsibility of his situation in life...Any other attitude was mere bad faith⁷⁴.” Thus, Sartre and Beauvoir felt obligated to find in postwar France a group or movement that would allow them to contribute, to “engage,” in the concrete reality of political struggle. In the immediate postwar years they were somewhat unsure of how to go about this task besides being vocal proponents of the purge, but already they saw in Communism the movement that seemed the most likely candidate for their support.

It was during the war that Sartre and Beauvoir made their first contacts with Communism. The French Communists controlled the best organized and most effective and widespread resistance group within France. *Socialisme et Liberte* collapsed almost as quickly as it had been formed in 1941 and the existentialists found themselves in regular contact with the Communists. Sartre wrote articles in the Communist journal *Action* defending existentialism from the charges of quietism and absurdity that were to haunt it throughout his life. Sartre claimed that existentialism was an “optimism, ‘a humanist

⁷³Ibid., 75.

⁷⁴Beauvoir quoted in Poster, 78.

philosophy of action, of effort, of combat, of solidarity’.” Mark Poster points out in *Existential Marxism in Postwar France* that Sartre went on to claim that existentialism came into fruition in the “revolutionary climate of the Occupation...in contravention to the widespread belief that it arose from the anomie of a petty-bourgeois intellectual⁷⁵.”

During the war two of Sartre’s plays served to bring him into the Communist resisters’ good graces: his allegorical *Baronia* written while he was incarcerated which has already been mentioned, and *Les Mouches*, which he wrote in 1942 and slipped past the censors. *Les Mouches* “became greatly admired by the Resistance for its political implications calling the people of France to fight for their national freedom⁷⁶.” *Les Mouches* anticipated most of the major existential themes--despair in the face of total freedom and the necessity of engagement. It also served to erase suspicions among the Communists that Sartre was actually a Vichy informer and he participated actively in the Resistance *Lettres Francaises*. Much of the pre-occupation with Communism that was to color Sartre and Beauvoir’s political stances for the next decades had its origins in the solidarity that they felt with the Communists during the Resistance. Sartre continued to insist following the war that his philosophy was the natural philosophical compliment to Marxism’s analysis of history. Despite the huge rifts between Sartre and the PCF in the decades following the war “he (Sartre) always felt that these belligerent opinions and contentious accusations reflected only a family quarrel. If he had to choose between the Communist Party and capitalist forces, it would be in favor of the former⁷⁷.”

Both Sartre and Beauvoir wanted to make as radical a break as possible from their earlier quietism and live up to their own ideal of constant engagement. The existentialists were dead-set on “engaging” themselves following the liberation. Sartre and Beauvoir went on the offensive, being two of the most vocal proponents of harsh prosecution of

⁷⁵Ibid., 109.

⁷⁶Ranwez, 38.

⁷⁷Ibid., 39.

intellectual collaborators. As Beauvoir wrote “There are words as murderous as gas chambers...In the case of Brasillach, there was no question of a mere ‘offense of opinion’; his...advocacy of murder and genocide constituted a direct collaboration with the Gestapo⁷⁸.” Likewise, Sartre wrote “The ‘committed writer’ is aware of the identity of word and action; he knows that the act of unmasking brings about change and that one only acts in this way in order to change things⁷⁹.”

It was in their journal *Les Temps Modernes*, first published in October 1945, that the debates and reconciliations between existentialism and Communism took place. It is within *LTM* that the vast majority of the articles that articulate Sartre and Beauvoir’s positions concerning the PCF, the Soviet Union, and Marxism in general are laid out. On the back of the first issue is the manifesto for *LTM*. It claimed that “The comedy of history, the switching of roles and the frivolity of the actors do not prevent us from discerning a clear enough course of action, provided only that we take pains to know what is going on rather than nourish phantasms, and provided that we distinguish anguish from anxiety and commitment from fanaticism⁸⁰.” The “clear enough course of action” has been an oft-commented upon point in that the point of action in postwar France was often anything but clear. Sartre and Beauvoir in particular were in the uncomfortable position of being on the far left while refusing to join or implicitly support any of the political parties of the left. While sometimes serving as apologists for the PCF or the Soviet Union and sometimes as harsh critics, they nevertheless never officially affiliated themselves with any group that was not of their own devising.

Along with this “clear enough course of action” the authors of *LTM* claimed to be “hunters of meaning.” Sartre wrote “If truth exists, I believed it is necessary to seek it everywhere. Each social product and each attitude...are allusive incarnations of it. One

⁷⁸Beauvoir quoted in Burnier, 20.

⁷⁹Sartre quoted in Burnier, 21.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

anecdote reflects an entire epoch as well as a political Constitution. We would become hunters of meaning, we would tell the truth of our world and our lives⁸¹.” The truly fascinating thing about the period in question is that along with the truths that Sartre and Beauvoir asserted in their purely philosophical works, truths like the critical importance of freedom in human authenticity and in the absence of empirical values outside of freedom itself, they accepted some of the basic points of Marxism a priori. As Sartre wrote in *Action* before the first issue of LTM had even come out, “Class struggle is a fact; I accept it unreservedly⁸².” The acceptance of class struggle, in a Communist journal no less, was to spell out a theme that was to run straight through the period in question. In 1958 Sartre wrote in the seminal *Le Fantome de Stalin* that “the socialist movement...is the absolute judge of all the others because the exploited encounter exploitation and the class struggle as their reality and as the truth of bourgeois societies⁸³.” Sartre squabbled with the PCF over particularities, and *Le Fantome de Stalin* itself is an extremely critical essay (which will be examined closely later) of the Soviet Union, but he still accepted some of the basic Marxist assertions without hesitation.

In the first few years after the end of the war Sartre came under fire from nearly every angle. He was overtly sympathetic to the PCF and the Soviet Union--the editor-in-chief of LTM at the time was his friend Merleau-Ponty, who in the postwar period was a Communist sympathizer as well. Together they proclaimed that “in case of war...they would side with Russia⁸⁴.” Resistance companions and intellectual peers of Sartre and Beauvoir like Raymond Aron and Albert Ollivier left LTM for political differences and Aron’s critiques of postwar existential Marxism are some of the most lucid examples of contemporary criticism leveled at Sartre and Beauvoir. The major

⁸¹Sartre quoted in Ranwez, 40.

⁸²Burnier, 25.

⁸³Jean-Paul Sartre, *Le Fantome de Stalin*, trans. Martha H. Fletcher and John R. Kleinschmidt (New York: George Braziller 1968), 4.

⁸⁴Burnier, 30.

voices of intellectual France to the right of Communism were naturally critical of two of the most formidable thinkers in the country for siding with the Soviets but the PCF itself was rarely supportive either. The postwar political vacuum in which the right was conspicuously absent quickly filled with Gaullists and “radicals” who supported the old patterns of bourgeois individualism. Beauvoir wrote “the words Right and Left...resumed their old meanings, and the Right was gaining ground⁸⁵.” The PCF had a solid grip on one fourth of the electorate but was not growing beyond that fourth.

The PCF’s attack on existentialism began almost as soon as the war ended. The PCF’s leader, Henri Lefebvre, attacked existentialism for “idealism, subjectivism, and waging war against Marxism⁸⁶.” There were even accusations that Sartre was being paid off by the United States. There was an enormous degree of ambivalence in the immediate postwar period between Sartre and the PCF. Sartre was very much interested in aiding the PCF; he had made it clear he perceived the political conflict of the time as a binary opposition between East and West and he wanted to do his part to support the East, for even if the dogmatic aspects of Communism as personified in the PCF and the Soviet Union sometimes distressed him he found the alternative repugnant. Instead of embracing him as a useful ally, however, the PCF kept Sartre guessing. As Mark Poster noted “One month Sartre was writing for the Communist papers...the next month he was their chief object of scorn. Sartre was bewildered: the Communist kept making overtures to him but with the first contact they would recoil and spring at him⁸⁷.”

The strange postwar dichotomy between existentialists and Communists was made all the more puzzling to the former since the Communists were often privately sympathetic. As Beauvoir wrote “When we met [high-level PCF leaders] in private, we always argued with good humor and seemingly on a basis of mutual esteem; which made

⁸⁵Beauvoir quoted in Ibid.

⁸⁶Ranwez, 38.

⁸⁷Poster, 110.

this public campaign all the more infuriating⁸⁸.” The “public campaign” was a series of articles in the Communist journals, especially *Action*, which claimed that existentialism was the philosophy that “exemplified the decay of bourgeois thought⁸⁹.” Even as prominent PCF members were privately contending that they thought existentialism was in fact compatible with Marxism they would publicly blast Sartre. “He [Sartre] was...visited by a Communist who asked him to ‘initiate a unification on the Left’...No sooner was this said than *Action* blasted Sartre’s radio speech as ‘traitorous⁹⁰.’”

The reasons for this odd dichotomy are fairly evident. Despite Sartre’s ongoing affair with Marxism as a system and his acceptance of some of the foundations of Marxist historical analysis (especially the fact that Sartre accepted the idea that class struggle is the basic characteristic of history) he never joined the PCF. Furthermore, LTM stood for a “third way” which sought to offer a viable leftist alternative which would synthesize genuinely revolutionary attitudes without slipping into the dogmatism of the PCF. As Poster points out “Sartre’s thought...was dangerous to the Party...the Communists were reformulating their political strategy and the loose unity on the Left had to be tightened⁹¹.” Simply put, the PCF could not afford to have some of the most influential (especially among the youth; existentialism was very provocative and widely discussed among the youth of France) leftist intellectual figures operating beyond the pale. The PCF itself was notoriously dogmatic; its spokespeople were expected to toe the Party line at all times, another reason why they could express sympathy towards the existentialists in private while publicly attacking them. In addition, existentialism itself “provoked a sharp split within the Party⁹²” in that many of the younger members thought existentialism *was* a natural compliment to Marxism. Even though the PCF had emerged

⁸⁸Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 44.

⁸⁹Ranwez, 39.

⁹⁰Poster, 111.

⁹¹*Ibid.*

⁹²*Ibid.*, 112.

from the war with a great deal of prestige and clout, its position was not stable enough to allow internal ideological debate.

Beauvoir's autobiography, *The Force of Circumstance*, provides illuminating commentary on the difficulties she and Sartre faced in this period. It was Sartre that was singled out for attack by the PCF but the intimacy of his and Beauvoir's relationship and the fact that they were mutually responsible for giving existentialism its contemporary form forced her to suffer along with Sartre. She wrote "I have often wondered what my position would have been if I had not been associated with Sartre...Close to the Communists certainly, because of my horror of all that they were fighting against; but I loved truth too much not to demand the freedom to seek it as I wished⁹³." This demand was too much for the PCF to accept since it relied on strict hierarchy in order to maintain the organization that was the major strength of the party. Simply put "Sartre [and Beauvoir] had shrunk from renouncing intellectual independence, a price the CP demanded of its thinkers⁹⁴."

Sartre's responses included *Existentialism is a Humanism*, which was probably a better enunciation of what exactly existentialism is than a defense against Communist attacks. His superior defense came in *Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism*⁹⁵. Sartre pointed out that Marxism as it was then codified in Stalinism and the PCF was riddled with contradictions. Most importantly, Sartre attacked the idea inherent in materialism that "presented the natural and human worlds as a single world of objects, argued the casual and metaphysical priority of matter over mind, and depicted a determinist view of man in history⁹⁶." In short, Sartre attacked the so-called "vulgar" Marxist interpretation of history that held that everything was linked to unstoppable

⁹³Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 45.

⁹⁴Poster, 127.

⁹⁵Jean-Paul Sartre, *Materialism and Revolution*, quoted from Poster.

⁹⁶Poster, 129.

economic cause-and-effect links and that all manifestations of human activity beyond the economic sphere were part of the so-called “superstructure” which was of strictly secondary importance. Sartre wanted to reconcile his philosophy with the revolutionary drive of Marxism but he could not accept in good faith the “doctrine that destroys thought⁹⁷”--materialism.

While on one hand Sartre’s essay is a strong defense of the kind of freedom that lies at the heart of his existentialism, Sartre is still unwilling to abandon some of the essential assumptions at the heart of Marxism. “I know that man has no salvation other than the liberation of the working class...I know that our intellectual interest lies with the proletariat⁹⁸.” Poster points out that the pattern of existential Marxism that was to continue for decades was established here: “Communist philosophy is a travesty; Communist politics are progressive⁹⁹.” Sartre asserted that while vulgar Marxism was ridiculous in that it claimed humans were swept along by the economic realities and the natural movement of history, helpless to resist, the basic assumptions of class struggle were accurate and the ethical move was to *choose* to support the revolution.

The basic problem of existential Marxism is outlined here. Sartre and Beauvoir explicitly rejected the hierarchical, dogmatic conformity of Stalinism and the PCF since they insisted that choosing freedom and choosing freely was the absolute foundation of ethical action. At the same time, they were entirely sympathetic to the overtly revolutionary stance of Marxism and the assumptions that in the early part of the 21st century, from Judt’s “privileged perspective,” do indeed seem “far, far removed.” Namely, the centrality of class struggle and the revolutionary role of the proletariat. For the rest of the period in question Sartre struggled to work out a problem he posed to himself: “A revolutionary philosophy ought to account for the plurality of freedoms and

⁹⁷Sartre quoted in Ibid.

⁹⁸Sartre quoted in Ibid., 130.

⁹⁹Poster, 131.

show how each one can be an object for the other while being...a freedom for itself¹⁰⁰” This statement stands out as one of the essential difficulties with existential Marxism itself. Sartre and Beauvoir never retreated from their position concerning personal freedom; freedom is the essential fact of human reality and any analyses of history, society, or history must be centered around freedom. At the same time they pursued a “revolutionary philosophy” since revolution seemed to them the only logical path for a philosophy of freedom, bourgeois capitalism being too stupefying and spirit-crushing to offer an acceptable alternative. Whether or not society is in fact a binary split between revolution and oppression is another question, a question that Raymond Aron (among many others) asked and which will be dealt with in the conclusion of this paper.

The basic position of Sartre and Beauvoir was that in being faithful to their intention to be constantly and entirely “engaged” in the world, trying to ignore the importance of the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union would have been an act of bad faith. They were explicit about their allegiance to the latter if the situation came down to a simple choice. Beauvoir toured America and a series of articles entitled *America Day by Day* appeared in *LTM*. She blasted “the despotic tendencies which were emerging with greater impudence¹⁰¹.” *LTM* began a discussion of the Marshall Plan in 1948 warning of the “American racism and implicit fascism¹⁰².” Even though their former companion Raymond Aron now supported the United States, Beauvoir and Sartre saw more of a threat in the complacent capitalism and perceived imperialism and reactionary politics of America than any of the Soviet Union’s shortcomings.

Judt points out that at least some of the postwar French intellectual rejection of America was simply part of a long tradition of anti-Americanism in Europe and in France

¹⁰⁰Sartre quoted in *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁰¹Beauvoir quoted in Burnier, 32.

¹⁰²Beauvoir quoted in *Ibid.*

in particular. “The French, intellectuals especially, resented the very fact that they had been liberated by the Americans...The Russians, by contrast, could be admired and appreciated from afar¹⁰³.” It is possible that Sartre and Beauvoir’s position towards the United States (and both were quite willing to go on extended lecture circuits in the states; Beauvoir wrote many letters to Sartre detailing her delightful times running around and drinking whiskey across the whole of the continental US) was informed by some kind of resentment complex, but it is probably unfair to give this argument too much weight. Beauvoir wrote “It meant so many things, America! To begin with, everything inaccessible; its jazz, cinema and literature had nourished our youth, but it had always been a great myth to us as well¹⁰⁴.” It seems unlikely that Sartre and Beauvoir’s critical attitude towards the United States in the postwar period was informed by simple anti-Americanism. Instead, since they believed that the essential political dichotomy of their day was between capitalist drudgery and Marxist liberation, their position was that the capitalism of the United States was infinitely more loathsome than the promise of a Communist future in the Soviet Union.

It is clear that neither Sartre nor Beauvoir were willing to accept France’s position as a capitalist fellow-traveler to the United States. They warned of the danger of the Marshall Plan and the intentions of the United States and were unceasingly critical of “capitalism” itself. That being noted, however, they struggled to find another path to realize the existential revolution they envisioned and tried to define in their writing. In February of 1948 Sartre co-founded the Rassemblement Democratique Revolutionnaire. The RDR, according to Ranwez, “was attracted to Communism but repelled by its pragmatism, aimed to recover the democratic tradition of revolutionary socialism. It was hoped that the mass of workers, along with independent leftist intellectuals, would find in

¹⁰³Judt, 195.

¹⁰⁴Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 17.

the RDR a movement that could fill the void created by the wide split between the Communist Party and the other leftist groups¹⁰⁵.” In short, the RDR was Sartre’s attempt to create an organization that he *could* support with all his considerable intellectual force and formidable prestige, unlike the PCF. “Sartre had at last discovered a political vehicle that he thought could resolve his contradictory positions: existentialism and Marxism, the writer and the activist, philosophical idealism and political materialism, isolated petty bourgeois and philosopher of engagement¹⁰⁶.”

The RDR was an attempt to “rediscover the great democratic tradition of revolutionary socialism” and, in accordance with Sartre’s continued belief in the central importance of the proletariat, the RDR’s founding statement claimed that it “cannot nor does it wish to be anything unless it first of all refers to the working class¹⁰⁷.” It was an overt attempt to appeal to democratic socialist sensibilities like those of Sartre and Beauvoir without having to court the now obviously hostile PCF. Another manifesto explained “we think that a party of free men for revolutionary democracy is capable of giving new life to the principles of freedom and human dignity by relating them to the struggle for social revolution..” It even ended with “Proletarians and free men of the world, unite¹⁰⁸!”

The Leftist press was sympathetic to the RDR--Camus sometimes wrote in its journal *La Gauche* and it was widely admired for the “sincerity” of its founding members and the perceived nobility of its undertaking. It was supposed to be a “gathering” that would attract members of all the Leftist parties and unite them under the banner of regenerated revolutionary democracy. The PCF quickly attacked, proclaiming itself to be the real “democracy of the working class¹⁰⁹” and in a few months there was strong

¹⁰⁵Ranwez, 43.

¹⁰⁶Poster, 140.

¹⁰⁷Quoted in Burnier, *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁰⁸Quoted in Burnier, *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁰⁹Burnier, 57.

opposition between the RDR and the PCF, despite the fact that Sartre continued to hope for a spirit sympathy and parallelism between the two. Sartre reiterated that the RDR's goal was to "link revolutionary claims with the idea of freedom¹¹⁰," in opposition specifically to the Stalinism which many RDR members equated with simple oppression.

The RDR was everything the existentialists wanted in a political organization. It was strictly voluntary (which is to say it did not attempt to convince members of other parties to abandon their allegiances but instead to include themselves in participation with the RDR as well) and tackled the issues of the day precisely in the spirit of "revolutionary democracy." *La Gauche* attacked colonialism, Gaullism, the threat of war between the United States and Russia (Sartre publicly spoke about the need for a sort of federation of neutral European states to help keep the peace), and especially Stalinism. It held a public lecture forum on December 13, 1948, which was attended by some four thousand people and which witnessed both Sartre and Beauvoir, along with several other prominent thinkers and writers, speaking about "internationalism, peace, a socialist Europe and unity¹¹¹."

The RDR collapsed as quickly as it had been formed. It stood as the high water-mark of Sartre's attempt to find a "third way" between Soviet Marxism and the bourgeois capitalism of the West. In less than a year Sartre, dismayed at the RDR's shift to the Right into a vehicle of "anti-communism" more than a means to encourage "revolutionary democracy" resigned from its board of directors. What had begun as ambivalence between the RDR and PCF quickly degenerated into open hostility and the RDR's meetings became little more than anti-Communist gatherings. Sartre could accept the necessity of criticism towards Communism but he was extremely troubled by the outright rejection of the entire Communist program.

¹¹⁰Sartre quoted in *Ibid.*, 59.

¹¹¹Burnier, 61.

Sartre's resignation was significant in that he no longer saw a "third way" as a viable option--to be truly engaged and to be approaching the political realities of Fourth Republic France in good faith Sartre from then on felt obligated to engage in an even more intimate dialogue with the PCF. Beauvoir wrote of Sartre in the early 1950s "the postwar period was over. No more postponements, no more conciliations were possible. We had been forced into making clear-cut choices. Despite the difficulty of his position, Sartre still knew had been right to adopt it¹¹²." Sartre and Beauvoir were in a way trapped between what they perceived as the ugly reality of politics in the early 1950s and their philosophy; the RDR had been an engaged political body inspired by "freedom" and it had collapsed after a few decently attended public speaking engagements and several poorly-attended meetings. Now the existentialists felt that the only choice was to try to stick close to the Communists and sway as many as possible to their way of thinking. It was in this period that Sartre had his historic break with Camus over *L'Homme Revolt* and that he wrote *Les Communistes et la Paix*, one of the most strikingly pro-Communist and problematic works of writing Sartre ever produced.

This was one of the most difficult periods of time for Sartre and Beauvoir in terms of the pessimism they felt towards the political realities of their day. By 1950 the existence of Soviet Labor camps, in which anywhere from ten to fifteen million people toiled and died,¹¹³ was an accepted reality in France thanks to the number of escaped former prisoners and their stories. Sartre struggled with this fact, once again forced to confront the incredible tyranny of Stalinism but still unwilling to reject Communism for fear of siding with its opponents. He wrote "how could one publicly condemn slavery in the East without abandoning, among us, those exploited by exploitation. But could we accept to work with the Party if it led to enchain France and cover her with barbed wire?

¹¹²Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 262.

¹¹³Ranwez, 48.

What could be done? Hit...on the right and on the left, upon two giants who did not feel our blows?...the only privilege of the Party is that it has still the right to our severity¹¹⁴.” Thoroughly disillusioned, Sartre claimed in essence that since the Communist Party offered the only hope of a liberated future and a real alternative to the drudgery of bourgeois capitalism, the only path open to him was to offer what amounted to constructive criticism. While disgusted by the existence of the prison camps, Sartre still insisted that “the USSR is on the whole, situated, in the balance of powers, on the side of those who are struggling against the forms of exploitation known to us. The decadence of Russian Communism does not make the class struggle a myth...or the Marxist criticism in general null and void¹¹⁵.”

Beauvoir’s autobiography speaks of this period of her and Sartre’s life in terms of frustration, anger, and a new-found commitment to support the most radical political positions since more moderate paths now seemed closed or simply impotent. Sartre claimed that “I was a victim of and an accomplice in the class struggle...I felt both responsible and powerless...I discovered the class struggle in that slow dismemberment that tore us away from them [the workers¹¹⁶.]” Sartre’s acceptance of the reality and the importance of the basic hypotheses of Marxism was total--History was based on class struggle and the workers were the owners, directors, and agents of the next phase of historical movement. Frustrated everywhere by what he and Beauvoir saw as the growing power of the Right Sartre wrote “In the name of the principles it had inculcated in me...in the name of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, I swore a hatred for the bourgeoisie that would die only with my own death¹¹⁷.” Camus published *L’Homme Revolte* expecting a

¹¹⁴Sartre quoted in Ibid.

¹¹⁵Sartre quoted in Poster, 163.

¹¹⁶Sartre quoted in Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 261.

¹¹⁷Sartre quoted in Ibid., 262.

favorable review from his old friends at LTM not aware of the massive gulf in ideologies that now, in November of 1951, lay between him and his fellow wartime resisters.

The break between Camus and Sartre was one of the most closely followed public quarrels in France at the time and it remains the object of a great deal of academic attention. It was not Sartre but one of LTM's writers, Francis Jeanson, who wrote the review that was to spark the permanent end of Sartre and Camus' friendship. Jeanson attacked *L'Homme Revolte* for being idealistic and for refusing to address the realities of history and politics without resorting to abstractions. Camus replied in a letter to "Monsieur le directeur," apparently thinking Sartre was directly behind the review (it seems likely he wasn't; although he did not like or agree with *L'Homme Revolte* he thought Jeanson's review was too strident¹¹⁸) and Sartre replied, in turn, to "Mon Cher Camus." Sartre blasted Camus once again for failing to understand Communism and refusing to take a political stand in good faith, resorting instead to grandiose abstractions about the human condition. Beauvoir wrote "Camus was an idealist, a moralist, and an anti-Communist; at the moment forced to yield to History, he attempted as soon as possible to secede from it...Sartre had labored since 1940 to repudiate idealism...to live in History; his position was close to Marxism, and he desired an alliance with the Communists....A neutralist position between the two blocs had become finally impossible; Sartre therefore drew nearer to the USSR....Camus...went over...to the American side¹¹⁹." Thus, two of postwar France's greatest thinkers found themselves on opposite sides of the cold war dichotomy, though neither was satisfied with the arrangement.

Having broken with Camus, abandoned the RDR, and drawn himself closer, if anything, to the PCF despite his attacks on the "decadence" of Soviet Communism, Sartre

¹¹⁸Ranwez, 53.

¹¹⁹Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 260.

was set off by the arrest of several Communist anti-American protesters on May 28, 1952. The government acted in a notoriously arbitrary fashion, “anxious to please the Americans¹²⁰” and Sartre’s disgust led him to pen *Les Communistes et la Paix*. In it, Sartre insisted on the primacy of not only Marxism and Communism as it was then manifested, but in the necessity for the proletariat to swear unceasing allegiance to the Communist parties of the world, in particular to the PCF in France. Sartre issued the famous statement that “an anti-Communist is a rat¹²¹” and associated “the Soviet Union with the cause of peace and the United States with the interests of war¹²².”

Importantly, Sartre for the first time since his purely philosophical work (which had emerged mostly in the early 1940s) further clarified the place of the self in relation to history. “We in turn determine our relationship with others, that is to say, the meaning of our life and the value of our death: it is within this framework that our self finally makes its appearance¹²³.” While Sartre had always insisted on the importance of the self *in relation* to others in that the authentic self struggled to realize not only its own freedom but the freedom of others, he now took a less abstract view of history. It was by engaging in freedom practically, in movements whose goals included human liberation, that the individual lived in good faith.

Sartre insisted that the workers had to come together in an active movement that defied what he perceived as its growing atomization--“Mechanical unity had to become organic unity. What shaped the masses of workers into proletarians was just the organic unity of their collective project to overcome alienation¹²⁴.” His arguments paralleled official Marxism (as it was espoused by the PCF) to a degree that the PCF actively lauded it--they applauded Sartre’s article and publicly saluted him for re-entering the fold. The

¹²⁰Poster, 164.

¹²¹Sartre quoted in Ibid.

¹²²Sartre quoted in Ibid., 165.

¹²³Sartre quoted in Ibid., 166.

¹²⁴Sartre quoted in Ibid., 168.

striking aspect of *Les Communistes et la Paix* is that it not only identified the power of history in shaping the individual's freedom of choice and called for the unity of the working people, but that it explicitly recognized the PCF and Soviet Communism as the voice of the people. "That the proletariat is that carrier of human values is not to be doubted; what it demands for itself it must necessarily claim for all¹²⁵" Sartre wrote, and then he went on to identify the PCF as the vessel of "the carrier of human values." The only point at which Sartre repudiated orthodox Communism was that he claimed that there had to be active organization on the part of the workers and the party to maintain unity; he no longer thought that the unity of the workers necessarily came about by itself.

Beauvoir wrote that Sartre "wrote the first part of *Les Communistes et la Paix* with a fury that frightened me¹²⁶." She noted that he slept only nine nights out of two weeks, for four or five hours a night when he did sleep. *Les Communistes et la Paix* is often seen as one of the most vulnerable works Sartre ever produced; he was attacked from every angle, including by his close friend and intellectual peer Merleau-Ponty (who was once much more of an orthodox Communist than Sartre.) Even works of secondary literature sympathetic to Sartre and socialism find a great deal to be critical of. The central problem with *Les Communistes et la Paix* is that, as Wilfrid Desan paraphrases Merleau-Ponty in *The Marxism of Jean-Paul Sartre*¹²⁷, "Is it fair to appoint oneself judge and theoretician of the Party and yet refuse to become a member? Sartre believes that this can be done, but why, then, is he less tolerant for the French worker, whom he obliges to carry a card membership and thereby deprives of the freedom he so generously offers to himself¹²⁸." Sartre did not allow the possibility (possibly out of frustration for his own attempts to find a possibility) that a third path was open to the worker sincerely interested

¹²⁵Sartre quoted in *Ibid.*, 170.

¹²⁶Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 262.

¹²⁷Wilfrid Desan, *The Marxism of Jean-Paul Sartre*, (Garden City NY: Doubleday & Company, 1965)

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 19.

in bringing about his own and his comrades' liberation besides that of following the Party line. Beauvoir defended Sartre by claiming that the Revolution was a need, not a abstract luxury of some kind, and that Sartre saw in the Communist party as it was manifested in the world at the time the best hope to realize this need¹²⁹.

This is the peculiar position that was to color Sartre and Beauvoir's approach to the issue of Marxism in the remaining few years of the period in question. Sartre wrote in *Les Communistes et la Paix* that "A great party represents them [that is, the PCF represents the proletariat]...the only one to concern itself with democratic rebirth and...the only one, finally, that is *alive*, that literally crawls with life while the others crawl with worms¹³⁰." It is somewhat difficult to imagine how Camus could have posed metaphors any more abstract than the idea that most political parties are rotting corpses. Echoing his conclusion about the existence of the Soviet labor camps-- that the Communists are privileged in that they still deserve the honest appraisal and criticism of LTM--Sartre claims in *Les Communistes et la Paix* that the PCF is the only party worthy of *any* real attention. Since only the PCF embodies the "particular interests (which are) the interests of a nation,¹³¹" only its efforts, successes, failings, and movements are valid while the entire sum of action from every other party is empty, banal, unimportant, and in a word, dead. This is not to say that Sartre and Beauvoir ignored the other parties, then or later, but *Les Communistes et la Paix* firmly establishes the "privileged perspective" that Sartre claims in *Le Fantome de Stalin*.

Le Fantome de Stalin is the most interesting piece of writing Sartre produced concerning Communism in the 1950s. It is the quintessential position piece of the existentialist struggling with the brutal realities of the Soviet Union. It was written after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in late 1956, an invasion so repressive that the official

¹²⁹Beauvoir paraphrased in *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³⁰Sartre quoted in Burnier, 81.

¹³¹Sartre quoted in *Ibid.*, 81.

organs of Communist policy (in France, the PCF) struggled to justify it. The PCF cited supposed American anti-Communist influence and some even claimed that the uprising in Hungary was organized by the “forces of world imperialism¹³²,” a statement so vague and problematic that Sartre had no difficulty ripping it to shreds. *Le Fantome de Stalin* is an abrupt about-face from *Les Communistes et la Paix* in many ways. Where in the former Sartre implies that the Communist party is the first and best hope of the proletariat and ultimately the world and he identifies it directly with the forces of liberation, Sartre takes the PCF and the Soviet Union directly to task for the “massacre” of Hungary in the latter. In *Le Fantome de Stalin* Sartre finally lays down the existential critique of the Soviet Union: “the USSR *defined by its acts* its own socialism and that which it counts on re-establishing in Hungary...the intervention *was the expression of a political policy*¹³³.”

Many commentators (notably Wilfred Desan) have held *Le Fantome de Stalin* up as the authentic Sartre, the clear-eyed commentator finally standing up to the Communists he had tried to help but was finally overwhelmed with disgust for their actions. This is not really the case. What makes *Le Fantome de Stalin* so interesting is that while Sartre does speak out against the multitude of abuses the Hungarian people had suffered (“Tortures, trumped up confessions, fake trials, work camps: these instances of violence are unpardonable in any situation¹³⁴.”) he still insists on the legitimacy of the socialist project and the viability of Communism itself. Sartre’s concern is not that Marxism as it was manifested in the world was running rampant dissolving human freedom and abusing innocent people, but that the Soviet Union’s actions endangered the whole project by de-legitimizing it in the face of the world. He writes “only one movement impels the exploited to claim for themselves and for all the possibility of being men fully and totally...only one produces...an ideology which allows it to understand itself and to

¹³²Sartre, *Le Fantome de Stalin*, 24.

¹³³Ibid., 13.

¹³⁴Ibid., 16.

understand (the world): this is the socialist movement taken as a whole. It is the absolute judge of all the others¹³⁵.” He continues, “To appraise a political undertaking, socialism is the ultimate reference...But the very development of socialism, the principles...which flow from the masses themselves, which it picks up and makes precise in its propaganda...offers us lights to clarify all enterprises and its own first of all¹³⁶.” Despite the rampant and obvious abuses of Soviet Communism Sartre still accepts the notion that somehow “socialism” itself is derived directly from “the masses.”

Sartre writes “communism seems to us, in spite of everything, like the only movement which still bears within itself the positive potential of socialism’s chances. But, in the present phase of socialist construction, violent contradictions are splitting the USSR and the Peoples Democracies¹³⁷.” This is his concern and his worry. Tony Judt has often noted that violence in itself did not concern many French intellectuals, Sartre especially. Judt even claims that “For Sartre, violence, exercised at the expense of others over a suitable distance of time or space, was an end in itself¹³⁸.” This seems far-fetched at best; in *Le Fantome de Stalin* Sartre admits the necessity of violence in some situations but overall he finds the violence of the Hungarian repression repugnant (“It’s necessary to respond to this idiot [a French Communist] that you don’t justify a massacre by the number of victims¹³⁹.”) At no point does he even approach a critique of the politics of socialism in a manner that would suggest he thought violence was “an end in itself.” Sartre believed in the mission of Marxism and he accepted that at times the necessity of violence in that mission but he was repulsed by gratuitous bloodshed. He noted, responding to Communists that claimed the entire intervention was necessary for the survival of the Communist project, “The Army of Socialism spilled blood at least once

¹³⁵Ibid., 4.

¹³⁶Ibid., 5.

¹³⁷Ibid., 6.

¹³⁸Judt, 126.

¹³⁹Sartre, *Le Fantome de Stalin*, 20.

without the least necessity...that night of October 23 when the Soviet command...agreed to throw its troops at the crowd¹⁴⁰.” Judt seems to think Sartre was some kind of sociopath--this is absurd.

Le Fantome de Stalin reveals the kind of intellectual environment in which Sartre wrote. Much of his text consists of direct responses to accusations and apologies of the PCF seeking to defend the invasion. Sartre summarizes their arguments: “Since the Red Army cannot shoot at workers without an absolute necessity, the Budapest massacre must have been necessary¹⁴¹.” The absolute absurdity of this statement reveals one important fact: Jean Paul Sartre, one of the pre-eminent intellectuals of his generation and one of the best known writers of his day, had to take the above position seriously. For all of his engagement with the USSR and his questionable stances on the specifics of Communism in the postwar period, Sartre never abandoned his philosophy that a person or a group of people are defined by their actions, not their manifestos. He saw in the project of socialism the best hope for a liberated humanity but he could not accept the substitution of tyranny for government. What does seem “far, far removed” in his analysis of the Hungarian uprising is that fact that Sartre is forced to go into the day-by-day details to undermine the Communist assertions of necessity and justice instead of just dismissing their apologies as so much drivel.

Sartre attacked the USSR and its puppets for accepting Marxism as an absolute instead of a useful critique of history and human reality. “Marx would have laughed at these pompous asses who take the class struggle for a Platonic Idea or who bring it in like a *Deus ex machina*¹⁴².” To Sartre, Marxism was something different: it was the system that illuminated the human condition of struggle that he had witnessed since the second world war. As Beauvoir wrote “Sartre saw the class struggle in all its clarity--men

¹⁴⁰Ibid., 18.

¹⁴¹Ibid.

¹⁴²Ibid., 28.

against men...friendships and rejections became a matter of passion¹⁴³.” Simply put, Sartre accepted the basic assertions of Marxism but he did not accept the simplicity with which Soviet Communism treated them. Sartre was among “those for whom the cramped catechism of the Stalinists had not been able to hide the immense possibilities of Marxism. These...were fighting to save the culture¹⁴⁴.” At the same time Sartre accuses the Soviets of not only misunderstanding Marxism but of separating themselves from the very workers that were the heart of the system: “The Soviets have always underestimated the revolutionary power of workers’ movements...The Soviet bureaucracy doesn’t like workers in arms; it far and away prefers soldiers¹⁴⁵.” Here Sartre has in a way transcended even the USSR in orthodoxy; he not only accuses the Russians of unnecessary brutality and short-sightedness, but of being lousy Marxists.

Even as Sartre attacks the Soviet intervention he refuses to finally condemn the USSR as a whole since, once again, it is the best hope of socialism. “Must one give the name of socialism, to this bloody monster which tears itself apart? I answer frankly: yes¹⁴⁶.” Sartre’s analysis is puzzling. *Le Fantome de Stalin* shifts away from the events of the Hungarian uprising and focuses instead of Stalinism and its effects, especially on the relationship between the USSR and the “Peoples Democracies” that surround it. He writes “No, the USSR did not colonize nor systematically exploit the Peoples Democracies. What is true is that it *oppressed* them for eight years¹⁴⁷.” Sartre does not fault the Soviet Union for wanting to surround itself with allies for fear of the attack of western capitalist nations¹⁴⁸ but he does fault them for not engaging in a political dialogue with them in a spirit of good faith. “I have said distrust pays a price: oppressed,

¹⁴³Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 261.

¹⁴⁴Sartre, *Le Fantome de Stalin*, 37.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., 60.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., 81.

¹⁴⁷Ibid., 93.

¹⁴⁸Ibid., 84.

ruined, treated as suspect, these allies became less and less reliable¹⁴⁹.” (93) Again, Sartre faults the Soviet Union for endangering the socialist project through poor decision-making and distrust.

Sartre’s message in *Le Fantome de Stalin* is not only that the Soviet intervention in Hungary was barbaric, unnecessary, and bad for Communism, but that it was high time for a “return to the sources of socialism.” Sartre claims that the Soviet Union must embark on a project of “de-Stalinization” and once again approach the Marxist project in good faith. “De-Stalinization is a policy of victory...It rejects Stalinist pessimism under its pseudo-Marxist form...you don’t always count on the worst and man is not always evil; one must prepare for peace by peace¹⁵⁰.” In essence, Sartre demands a shift to the authentic Marxist project, to Marxism as a liberating doctrine instead of an oppressive system.

While Sartre refuses to condemn the USSR outright, he does condemn in no uncertain terms the way it is run in his time. “True socialism is not separable from the real praxis of real men...it is men on the march who group together and carry each other along, who organize themselves and change in organizing, who are made by history and who make it...But the socialism in the name of which Soviet soldiers fired on the masses in Hungary, I don’t know, I cannot even conceive of it...it is a name which is given to a new form of alienation¹⁵¹.” Sartre identifies “true socialism” with liberation itself, and any vacillation from this project is by definition not really socialist. In the light of this idea, Sartre’s statements make more sense: “the USSR must live, it is necessary *for the cause of Communism*: all men of the Left will admit it. But it is also necessary that it remain socialist...the concrete struggle of the masses is drowned in blood in the name of a pure abstraction which sets itself up as essential and which casts into insignificance and

¹⁴⁹Ibid., 93.

¹⁵⁰Ibid., 103.

¹⁵¹Ibid., 115.

particularity all men of flesh and bones...when its [the USSR] leaders...send the army of the people against an allied country...they...transform the USSR...into a predatory nation¹⁵².”

Likewise, Sartre’s conclusion, that “It [socialism] intends to give liberty and justice to all men¹⁵³,” explains why he remains faithful to its overall project while so many of his friends and colleagues had abandoned it already. To Sartre in 1957, the Soviet Union was not Socialism, Communism, or Marxism. Instead, it was the carrier of these traditions and its errors were part of the very real, very human projects it undertook. He noted that “these contradictions [that the Soviet union is often oppressive] are engendered right out of the undertaking itself and that the latter cannot be understood outside of its objectives¹⁵⁴.” In a way, it is Sartre’s refusal to abandon the socialist project that is in good faith; while so many of his former fellow-travelers had abandoned all hope for a liberated future Sartre saw in the failures of the USSR the difficult realities of being human in the world. He dismissed the USSR’s own apologists who tried to associate Marxism with a higher power and instead insisted that failures were inevitable, regrettable, and should be overcome, but they did not invalidate the move towards human freedom personified in socialism. The difficulty of his position arises from the fact that he never allowed the possibility that Marxism might *not* be entirely accurate in its analysis of history. In addition, he refused to consider that a liberated future might be possible in a movement besides one that was explicitly socialist. He insisted that socialism was in fact the movement of freedom.

This assertion is very difficult to accept in light of Sartre and Beauvoir’s philosophy. On the one hand it seems very much to be in the spirit of “engagement”--rather than falling back on abstractions Sartre insists that the true believer

¹⁵²Ibid., 116.

¹⁵³Ibid., 119.

¹⁵⁴Ibid.

in human freedom must fight for the side which seems to have the best chance of realizing liberation: the Soviet Union. At the same time, existentialism allows no excuses and allows no one the right to set up empirical goals and truths. To do so is to live in bad faith. Sartre makes a final prophetic statement: “socialist construction *is privileged in this*: that one must, to understand it, espouse its movement and adopt its objectives; in a word, one judges what it does in the name of what it intends, its means in the name of its end, whereas one evaluates all other undertaking by what they ignore, what they neglect or what they reject¹⁵⁵.” The final section of this paper will attempt to hold Sartre and Beauvoir accountable for their politics in the face of their philosophy, starting with this very problematic statement.

CHAPTER V

Can an existentialist in good faith “privilege” a given movement or set of ideals with the benefit of the doubt simply because its goals seem more in line with those of freedom itself? The most difficult task Beauvoir and Sartre faced in their philosophical work is the attempt to reconcile the place of the radically free and isolated individual with their place in the world in relation to other people. Beauvoir writes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* “A doctrine which aims at the liberation of man evidently can not rest on a contempt for the individual; but it can propose to him no other salvation than his

¹⁵⁵Ibid.

subordination to the collectivity¹⁵⁶.” Later she concludes that “Only the future can take the present for its own and keep it alive by surpassing it. A choice will become possible in the light of the future, which is the meaning of tomorrow because the present appears as the facticity which must be transcended toward freedom¹⁵⁷.” Likewise, Sartre insists in *Existentialism and Human Emotions* that moral judgment is possible in existentialism in that the honest human “can no longer want but one thing, and that is freedom, as the basis of all values. That doesn’t mean that he wants it in the abstract. It means simply that the ultimate meaning of the acts of honest men is the quest for freedom as such. A man who belongs to a communist or revolutionary union wants concrete goals; these goals imply an abstract desire for freedom; but this freedom is wanted in something concrete¹⁵⁸.”

So what does this mean? Sartre and Beauvoir present their most striking paradox in their treatment of “the quest for freedom as such.” Despite the total freedom each individual has in making his or her choices, a freedom unencumbered by empirical values or higher powers, the individual *must* struggle for “something concrete” that represents the drive towards freedom. Beauvoir claims, in the above quotes, that just as the individual must fight for his own freedom and the freedom of others, he must also include himself in a movement which works for freedom by accepting “subordination to the collectivity.” Even as Beauvoir attacks the individual who sets up false objective idols in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* she insists that it is in the hope of a free future for all humans that the ethical person acts. Furthermore, the task of the present is informed by what it aims towards in the future, a point that she and Sartre remained consistent to in their political positions during the entire period in question.

¹⁵⁶Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 103.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., 115.

¹⁵⁸Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 46.

Sartre and Beauvoir's conclusion is that the socialist project is privileged since it works precisely towards the "abstract desire for freedom...wanted in something concrete." There are serious problems with Sartre and Beauvoir's assertions. The heart of the problem is that Sartre and Beauvoir struggle to connect radical freedom and a revolutionary socio-political stance but in order to do so the internal logic of existentialism has to be bent considerably. Simply put, there is a leap in logic from the idea that "we are all completely free" to "we have an ethical obligation to become part of a mass movement whose eventual goal is total human freedom." The greatest failure on the part of Sartre and Beauvoir in their postwar politics is the fact that they "privileged" the socialist movement in a way that invested it with certain facticities that were not actually factually true. They accepted certain points of Marxist theory as real truths and credited Communism as a movement endowed with the spirit of freedom even though its abuses of real, concrete human freedoms were rampant and obvious. In short, their treatment of Marxism and Communism often strayed dangerously close to the very "abstractions" they warned against. These were some of the points Raymond Aron made in *Marxism and the Existentialists*.

For a brief period from *Les Temps Modernes'* inception in October of 1945 until June of 1946, Raymond Aron sat on its board and contributed his writing. He was Sartre and Beauvoir's intellectual peer and all three had known each other during the Resistance. Aron's *Marxism and the Existentialists* is an essential guide to Sartre and Beauvoir in the postwar period because Aron attempted to critique the connection between Marxism and existentialism while acknowledging the force of both doctrines. At times Aron's writing seems directed from three decades in the past directly at Judt. He writes "Marxism and existentialism, sometimes separately and sometimes together, although often regarded as anachronistic by English or American philosophers...continue to represent one of the major philosophical tendencies of our age. This is why I continue to take seriously questions that were and still are raised by Marxists and

existentialists¹⁵⁹.” Aron was and Judt remains “liberal” but it is Aron, writing in the midst of the period in question, who acknowledges the force of the existentialists’ arguments, while Judt can comfortably dismiss them from his “privileged perspective.”

Aron’s language is refreshingly straight-forward compared to the bombastic exhortations of the PCF or even of Sartre himself. He writes “Personally, I objected less to the political attitude [Sartre’s Marxism]...than to the philosophical justification of decisions which I considered personal and arbitrary¹⁶⁰.” Aron points out Sartre’s basic project: “the reconciliation of a philosophy of personal destiny with a philosophy of collective salvation by history” but points out that in the existential scheme “If humanity begins with revolt, it must endlessly repeat an enterprise which cannot succeed and which cannot be abandoned¹⁶¹.” Aron notes the difficulty of the existential political project while still acknowledging that the project is at least internally consistent--it is the Sisyphean task which is supposed to invest life with meaning. Instead, Aron’s objections arise from the fact that the connections between existentialism, a philosophy of “solitary consciousness¹⁶²” and Marxism seem forced; Marxism (in both its vulgar and its revised forms) claims that humanity fundamentally operates in groups while existentialism in its most basic form insists that humans are radically free individuals.

Aron acknowledges the legitimacy of viewing a reconciled future as a concrete goal but he is reluctant to sacrifice the lives and freedom of real, living people in the name of creating a better future for their descendants. “I plead for the living, not against those who will come after them, but against the casualness with which intellectuals of good will agree to let the living suffer for the possible profit to those who are not yet born¹⁶³.” This is his essential break with Sartre, above and beyond the fact that Aron

¹⁵⁹Aron, *Marxism and the Existentialists*, 11.

¹⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁶¹*Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁶²*Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁶³*Ibid.*, 13.

simply rejects Marxism and Sartre does not; Sartre is precisely one of these “intellectuals of good will” who thinks that even though Communist abuses of power are repugnant, they are acceptable as long as the long march towards freedom continues. Aron could not stand by a regime that tortures its citizens while Sartre, although disgusted with the Soviet Union, still concludes at the end of *Le Fantome de Stalin* that the “bloody monster that tears itself apart,” the USSR, is still the best hope for freedom.

Aron offers a serious indictment of the existentialists that differs from anything Judt has to say since it holds them to their own standards: “the Marxian existentialists...assume as determined in advance what is incapable of being known and perhaps even of being realized. They subordinate freedom to a pseudo-fatality and enslave it to myths¹⁶⁴.” This is still, forty-five years later, probably the most important and lucid attack on Sartre and Beauvoir yet offered. Both Sartre and Beauvoir write explicitly of the need to avoid myths, abstractions, and empirical truths that don’t exist concretely on earth. There are even times when they fire salvos at the Communist parties of the world for falling prey precisely to this problem (“he is no longer a man, but...a member...of the Communist Party.¹⁶⁵”) The problem is that Sartre and Beauvoir accept some of the essential Marxist assertions and claim that Communism is the movement that embodies the drive towards freedom. If values are brought into the world only through actions, a state that abuses freedoms, no matter what its stated goals are, does not create or embody the value of freedom.

Aron notes that the essential problem of the existential Marxist is the problem of all Marxist revisionists: they try to insert the random human factor in a philosophy that in its vulgar form is one in which history takes care of itself and historical development happens without the conscious intervention of anyone. Aron points out that “Even Sartre,

¹⁶⁴Ibid., 14.

¹⁶⁵Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 48.

who denies all objective historical determinism, ends by admitting that socialism had *necessarily* to take the form of the “cult of personality.” The philosopher of freedom is unable to condemn, even retrospectively, the crimes of Stalinism¹⁶⁶.” This is a valid point as well. Throughout *Le Fantome de Stalin* Sartre attacks the USSR for firing on people whom he sees as fellow Communists--proletarians at that. He cannot, however, bring himself to do more than, basically, scold the USSR for undermining the good name of the socialist project.

Sartre writes in order to try and convince the USSR, or at least the PCF, to act in stricter accordance with Marxism as much as to cease the abuses of power that lead to human suffering. Writing about the Soviet invasion of Hungary he notes “The Soviets have always underestimated the revolutionary power of workers’ movements...[they] bet against the Marxist revolutionaries¹⁶⁷.” Sartre insists that if the Soviets should have simply trusted Marxist principles instead of attacking out of paranoia because “the insurgents wanted to form...a National Guard composed of students and workers. They would have been made, in sum, the guardians of nationalized industry¹⁶⁸.”

Furthermore, Sartre’s allegiance to Marxism is puzzling in itself. Aron writes “[Sartre] announces with a dogmatism that is unconsciously naive that the analysis in *Das Kapital* is so completely and obviously true that any commentary is useless and could only serve to weaken its doctrine¹⁶⁹.” This does seem bizarre. Sartre was nothing if not critical, and yet his acceptance of the fundamental assertions of Marx are staggering in their naiveté. One cannot help but hear the echo of idolatry in the statement “Marx would have laughed at these pompous asses¹⁷⁰.” Sartre saw himself as not only a critic of the PCF, the Soviet Union, and the Left generally, but as the voice of *real* Marxism. As

¹⁶⁶Aron, 16.

¹⁶⁷Sartre, *Le Fantome de Stalin*, 60.

¹⁶⁸Ibid.

¹⁶⁹Aron, 10.

¹⁷⁰Sartre, *Le Fantome de Stalin*, 28.

noted before, much of Sartre's inspiration for writing *Les Communistes et la Paix* seems to have been simple anger and indignation over the failure of the RDR and the shift to the Right in French politics at the end of the 1940s. Aron writes "The failure of this project (the RDR) brought him closer to the Communist party, with whom he collaborated¹⁷¹." His own attempt at a political action group based on some kind of socialism and a particular reading of Marx having fallen through, Sartre determined instead to align himself more closely with the forces of orthodox Communism *even though* they acted consistently against what even the most casual observer would claim was in accordance with the spirit of freedom. Sartre's acceptance of Marxist dogma had always been problematic but it seems clear that it was in the post-RDR period that he acted in real bad faith; putting the issue of Marxism to the side it was clear by the late 1940s that the Soviet Union was not contributing to the spirit of freedom in the world.

There is a sort of fretful disgust Sartre holds for capitalism, for the West, and for everything "bourgeois" which serves to make some of his analyses seem pale and forced. He writes "if the USSR is worth neither more nor less than capitalist England, then, indeed, not much is left to us but to cultivate our garden¹⁷²." With this bold statement, Sartre dismisses anything that does not offer radical (and specifically Marxist) freedom as its end and goal. One of the myriad of problems, however, is summarized acutely by Judt. In LTM in 1953 a series of articles appeared written by Marcel Peju concerning show trials in Czechoslovakia. Judt paraphrases Peju (who was, like Sartre, a Communist fellow-traveler) as saying "the very worst sin for a Communist regime would be for it to conduct traditional politics under the guise of "revolution....'if they substitute, in other words, revolutionary mystification for liberal mystification, everything is put back into question.'" Judt adds, "But how would you *know*¹⁷³?" Sartre was aware that the USSR

¹⁷¹Aron, 7.

¹⁷²Sartre, *Le Fantome de Stalin*, 121.

¹⁷³Judt, 127.

and the PCF often failed utterly to follow Marxist principles and abused their power, but he made a very un-existential leap of faith: Sartre never questioned the reality of the class struggle or the absolute primacy of the proletariat, and more to the point Sartre always accepted that the USSR was basically Marxist, whatever its failings.

There is a simple contradiction in the works of the existentialists concerning Marxism. They reject, as Sartre rejects Communists who see the class struggle operating as some kind of “*deus ex machina*,” a vulgar Marxism that does not allow a place for human freedom in the equation of history. This placed them alongside so many other Marxist revisionists, struggling to make sense of a system in which the proletariat rose up against the bourgeoisie *naturally*, due to its interests in doing so. It is in this spirit that Beauvoir insisted that “I act not for the joy of acting but because I am hungry or because in one way or another my situation is untenable. The Revolution is not *un article de luxe*, it is a need¹⁷⁴.” The Revolution, the class struggle, the proletariat, all became part of the facticity of the world when Sartre and Beauvoir accepted the basic tenets of Marxism. The problem with this position is that existentialism allows no political truths outside of the fact that each person is free to choose their allegiances. Beauvoir and Sartre didn’t just align themselves with socialism since they thought it was the political movement that operated most closely to the spirit of freedom. Instead, they accepted Marxist doctrines that necessarily compromised their own freedom to choose politically.

There is an essential difference between Aron and Judt. Both reject Marxism utterly, but Judt does so with considerable contempt while Aron notes that he “wished with all my heart that Marxism was true¹⁷⁵.” Aron seeks to explain the force of the postwar French intellectual struggle with Marxism not in a removed and indignant manner like Judt does, but with a certain respect for the force of the argument made by

¹⁷⁴Beauvoir paraphrased in Desan, 20.

¹⁷⁵Aron, 2.

the Marxism of his time. While Judt's observations, research, and analyses are formidable, they fail to take the legitimacy, at least at the time, of the Marxist project seriously. The bottom line is that it is too easy to dismiss Marxism now that the USSR has fallen and Marxism has been on the decline for the last few decades; while modern political analyses do not have to approach Communism with the same seriousness they might have had to when half the world was dominated by a Marxist regime, it is irresponsible to dismiss with the same ease *past* thinkers for whom Marxism was one of the prevailing socio-political theories.

What makes Aron's writing so useful in this critique is the fact that his sympathy for the idea of Communism forced him to reject it only with regret and only because he was confronted with overwhelming evidence against it. Furthermore, Aron's writing seems sometimes to be in good faith in a surprisingly existential sense. Aron writes "Having renounced, regretfully but once and for all, a 'monistic' or all-inclusive view of contemporary evolution, I was resigned to making decisions that were free and tended by risk, not blindly, but without any precise or certain knowledge of the future...the 'pluralistic' nature of the historical reality as well as the plurality of values makes our choices both ambiguous and dramatic¹⁷⁶." Aron here sounds staggeringly existential...his writing could have been plopped into The Ethics of Ambiguity and sounded right at home. In fact, he notes "Beginning with Marxism, I arrived at the tragic existentialism of Max Weber¹⁷⁷." Whether inspired by Weber or the philosophical work of Beauvoir and Sartre, Aron's own politics seem very much in good faith in the existential sense; he rejects abstract realities and accepts the difficulty and necessity of making political choices in an ambiguous moral environment.

¹⁷⁶Ibid., 3.

¹⁷⁷Ibid.

Probably the most difficult task Sartre and Beauvoir had in their purely philosophical works was connecting the radically separated fate of individuals with a common duty to work together for freedom. Their analyses are strongest where they are strictly negative; that is, they provide strong arguments for the essential ambiguity of the human situation and for the idea that human life is full of choices that have no fixed ethical reference points. Their positive program, of the centrality of freedom not only as a description of the human condition but as an ethical principle, rests on less firm logical ground. Finally, their assertion that only by engaging in the world can a person hope to live an ethical life seems slightly redundant; they make it clear that even the choice to attempt a sort of quietism is an active choice and by retreating from freedom a person merely engages in the world in bad faith. The only way to go is forward into action; one literally cannot disengage.

The problem that concerns this paper, however, is that it seems apparent that Sartre and Beauvoir fell into some of the very ethical traps that they warned of. Even if freedom is allowed its positive centrality in the existential scheme, as a goal and inspiration as well as an absolute factor in human life, Sartre and Beauvoir did not always act in alliance with freedom. Aron's position ironically, since he was never an "existentialist," is more consistent with existentialism than the decades-long flirtation with Marxism of Sartre and Beauvoir. To "make decisions that (are) free and tended by risk" is *precisely* what Beauvoir writes about in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. By accepting the basic analyses of Marxism without a sufficiently critical attitude, Sartre and Beauvoir set up idols of their own devising and ultimately compromised their own freedom to act in the world. When the Soviet Union was running rampant in eastern Europe Sartre could indict it for its inconsistency with Marxism but he could not land the final critical blow and reject the false structure of Marxism itself. Both Sartre and Beauvoir supported Communism despite the fact that in the existential ethical scheme it contributed nothing

to freedom; its acts brought brutality and repression into the world no matter what its supposed future goals were.

While Sartre and Beauvoir were in bad faith by accepting the Marxist analysis of history, the alternative is not precisely clear. It is exceedingly obvious that both held a total contempt for the bourgeoisie and for capitalism itself. The problem, again, is that this contempt is out of line, again, with pure existentialism. While Sartre venomously rejects the notion that the best hope for humanity is to “tend its garden” he fails to realize or at least to acknowledge that to struggle for human liberation in *any* political context, be it capitalist, communist, socialist, tyrannical, or anarchic is the task of the existentialist and to fight for human freedom within a capitalist society is not, in fact, a contradiction in terms.

While it isn't the place of this paper to attempt to outline exactly what ethical political action is in an ethically ambiguous situation, it seems clear that the greatest danger in such an analysis is to allow the kind of abstractions, empirical standards, and grandiose assertions that Sartre and Beauvoir warn about to take hold. The negative analyses of existentialism provide enormously powerful argumentative weapons in a political context. Existentialism refuses to allow empty abstractions to hide concrete actions and facts and it is in this spirit that it may well prove itself most useful in any political context. Now as in the postwar period politicians and parties constantly hide their motivations and legislation behind abstractions by referring to moral absolutes and supposed “laws” of economic and social reality. Existentialism claims that the only reality is that of facticity and the absolute freedom each person has to make their own choices. In short, existentialism stands in total opposition to attempts to legislate issues of personal choice and reminds the observer to pay attention to what parties and individuals are doing concretely and to reject any and all claims and references to moral absolutes. An analysis of the practical implications of existentialism (or any other philosophy based on the essential ambiguity of the human situation) would have to

concentrate on the positive positions that may emerge out of its essentially negative stance. The greatest danger in any attempt to describe such a scheme would be the very thing that Sartre and Beauvoir fell prey to--the introduction of "facts" that are actually just further abstractions. Finally, a positive analysis would have to accept the existence of the "plurality of values" that Aron refers to and be able to allow a certain amount of the essential ambiguity of human life to remain intact without trying to create a comprehensive and ultimately artificial program of human action.

In closing, it seems apparent that there is nothing wrong with concluding that existentialism is a revolutionary philosophy, or at least that it can be the philosophy behind a revolution. It may be that at a particular juncture of history a revolution is necessary to allow the greater total of human freedom in a nation or a continent or the planet. Where Sartre and Beauvoir were in bad faith was in their assumption that there *had* to be a revolution, and a Marxist one at that, in order for the existential project to come to fruition.

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