

Review of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* Andy Blunden 2005

Hegel's *Logic* can be read as an elaboration of social relations in the form of an extended logical theorem. For Hegel the development of culture and history was the work of Spirit, and so ultimately a metaphysical conception of the human condition. Sartre's apparent aim to turn this "upside-down" by describing the dialectic of social movements by their *own* logic, as the work of *people* rather than as the work of Spirit, looks on the face of it, a very exciting project.

The outcome however is somewhat disappointing; while Sartre's notorious pessimism can give him an edge over all kinds of formalism and revolutionary bravado, the *Critique* is devastating in its conclusion; if "Volume 2" never appeared, perhaps it is not so much the foundation, as a crypt of an unfinished project.

Nevertheless, *Critique* is a humanist, anti-metaphysical, anti-structuralist explication of the dialectic, but one which was constrained by the limitations of the social position of the author and of his times.

Totalisation

Let us begin with Sartre's exposition of his concept of "Totalisation," put forward in opposition to Lukács' concept of "totality" first outlined in *History and Class Consciousness* (1922). For Lukács, "totality" indicated the conception of the subject and object as determinations of a single relation. Lukács intended that the "totality" be understood as *capital*, as the capitalist mode of production generated all the relations relevant to the resolution of its crisis.

Lukács himself, in *The Young Hegel* (1938) and in his 1967 Preface to *History and Class Consciousness*, condemns this notion as resting on the "religious" notion of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history.

In retrospect it is now easy to see that such a conception of "totality" is tantamount to dogmatism of the same genre as follows from determinism. "Totality" must not be made into an absolute - a "total totality." But Lukács was quite correct in insisting on the immanent critique of social relations, for which the conception of subject and object as a totality is essential. In lieu of the idea of "total totality" Sartre posits the notion of materiality as infinite and imponderable interconnectedness, and in lieu of Lukács's notion of "subject-object relativity," Sartre elaborates a dialectic and anti-dialectic of social relations.

For Sartre, "totalisation" refers to the processes whereby an entity, composed of a multiplicity of parts, constitutes itself or is constituted, as a totality, that is as a *thing* - either a thing-in-itself or a thing-for-itself.

Sartre uses the example of a painting, which is conceived as a thing (or totality) by an act of the imagination (and not just the activity of the painter), which makes all the bits of paint, etc., exist as a single work of art. As soon as that external act of imagination ceases to be active one way or another, the painting becomes subject to "inertia" and gradually disintegrates. [p. 45]

The totality he has in mind of course is not just a *material* thing, but a living institution or organisation, a *social* totality - a state or party brought into being by the creative act of a social movement of some kind; as soon as this social movement

ceases to actively and energetically create and recreate the institution, it falls prey to inertia, the gradual disintegration of centrifugal molecular movement.

Further, there are two kinds of activity (or labour) by means of which an entity is “totalized” or constituted as a thing: the activity of those who “inhabit” the thing (the bureaucracy) and the activity of those who created (and recreate) it and continue to recognize it in their actions. [p. 45-46] So totalisation is a process which is both subjective and objective, both a self-consciousness and an act of recognition, both a product and a force of production, both ideal and material.

So “Totalisation” is the process, the activity of living people, which maintains a totality as such, without which, to use Sartre’s term, it would “erode” and disintegrate into its parts, like any material object. There is nothing really problematic with this conception of “totalisation.” However, as Frederic Jameson says in the 2004 Foreword to the *Critique*: “the ideological connotation with which the Sartrean term has been more recently endowed pointedly conflates” Sartre’s ‘totalisation’ and Lukács’ ‘totality’, “and makes Sartre over into yet another philosopher of ‘totality’ ... and the hegemony of the white male Western intellectual ... ‘Totalising’ has thus become a slogan which identifies a claim to speak from above and for all of society, as opposed to the minoritarian and differential positions ...”

But for Sartre, “totalisation” is the act by which a social movement *constitutes itself* as a subject of its own activity, a “thing-for-itself,” a “self-consciousness,” so the charge is very wide of the mark. The interest in Sartre’s way of posing of the moment of “for itself” lies in how he connects this process with his conception of a world of “worked matter” and what happens when the struggle which is ‘hot’ *cools off*, leaving behind institutions in the form of inert, petrified forms of consciousness and activity.

Worked Matter

Sartre begins with an analysis of individual praxis (conscious purposive activity) which, he points out, can only happen through and by means of a material environment, *worked matter*, matter (including human activity) which has already been “totalised” by past activity, “the jelly-like substance which constitutes human relations” [p. 120] including language, customs, institutions and all kinds of “third parties” to any interaction, not to mention buildings and a natural, material environment which is infinitely interconnected.

This concept of worked matter also accounts for the moral universalism of modern people, by which we recognise even strangers as worthy of reciprocity.

There are several implications to the essential role of “worked matter” in collaboration between people: that everyone else, both present and past, participates to some degree in every creative act, imposing themselves through the traces of their activity, so that every human act is a social act, that the material basis of collaboration is subject to continual erosion or “inertia,” and that the infinite network of repercussions set up by materiality therefore means that every creative human act “enters into relation with the entire Universe” [p. 161] and brings infinitely many utterly unpredictable results. On the other hand, it is only thank to the inertia of matter that a unity created by praxis has any continuing existence beyond the moment of its conception.

Sartre must have been a little ahead of his time in his description of how Nature “takes its revenge” on human beings, ceaselessly throwing back on people, the unexpected results of their activity, but at the same time, constituting people in

societies by means of the logic imposed by material necessity. This “dialectic” of Nature and worked matter, which does not just passively resist and place limits on human activity, but actively works against it, according to its *own* logic, Sartre calls *anti-dialectic* or “inverted practice.” So History is the unfolding of two opposite dialectics, that of creative praxis, and that of inert matter.

Objectification

From this standpoint then “objectification *is* alienation” [p. 163] for everything you make, once it enters the material world - never mind as the property of another person and of a hostile social class - becomes the instrument of an infinite material world, just like the peasants who clear a forest in order to plant a crop, but are swept away in the flood and landslide that results from their clearing. Here Sartre sides with Hegel, and after him Derrida: all production, all objectification, is alienation, while for Marx alienation is specifically associated with one’s labour becoming the instrument of an alien subjectivity. For Sartre, it appears that the product of one’s labour *always* falls into the hands of an alien subject - “human labour, though only just ‘crystallised’, is enriched with new meanings precisely to the extent that it eludes the labourer through its materiality.” [p. 164] Thus what we have here is not alienation as the condition of an oppressed class, but an alienated human being and an alienated human species. Human labour transcends Nature (and the past), but Nature reappears within society as an *inverted praxis*. [p. 165]

Consciousness

Class relations, the interests of different classes of people and those classes themselves and their ‘options’ are therefore “inscribed in Being.” Thus Sartre analyses the “working class” as in the first place an “in itself” in which a multiplicity of individuals are subject to a “common materiality” formed entirely by this “anti-dialectic” before the class can achieve an active unification, as a class “for itself.”

The core of the *Critique* then is devoted to tracing this process by means of which an inert collective being *totalizes itself*. This is to be where one hopes to find a modern alternative to Hegel’s *Logic* in the way Sartre traces the human dialectic self-developing from inert collectives, indirect gatherings and “seriality” (in Hegel’s terminology, “Being”) to collective praxis, the fused group, the pledged group and the statutory group (in Hegel’s terminology, “Essence”) to institution (in Hegel’s terminology, “The Notion”). The content is much thinner though.

By way of comparison it is worth recalling what Hegel does firstly with those very early moments of group formation (Reflection in Hegel’s terminology).

The first moment of Reflection is *Identity* and Hegel sums this up in the maxim “Everything is identical with itself.” Every activist is familiar with this maxim, expressed for example as “We’re all here for the same reason,” which dominates the thinking of people coming together reflectively for the first time, and which group dynamic theorists call the phase of “politeness.” The second moment of Reflection is *Diversity* and Hegel sum this up in the maxim “No two things completely are alike.” Group dynamics experts call this the stage of union or “norm formation” in which recognition is given to the diversity of those present and the need to work out norms of cooperation. Hegel’s third moment is Opposition, or “essential difference” summed up in the maxim of the Excluded Middle in which a group faces the need to make a choice and adopt policies and strategies. The final moment of Reflection for Hegel is contradiction, or essential opposition, the phase which group dynamics expert call the phase of “struggle.” And so on, and so on, through scores of such maxims and logical

figures which activists will recognize as characteristic of thinking at different stages in the formation of collective consciousness.

It would seem that there is a space for a dialectic which traces this logical development from the side of *real* human relations, drawing on the experience of social movements and summing up them up in a *critique of dialectical reason*. Surely Sartre ought to have done this work, but he does not. The moments of the *Critique* which approximate the moments referred to above, that is to say the earliest moments of reflection, are the “Fused Group,” which passes quickly to the “Pledged Group” and the “Statutory Group” before passing over to the equivalent of Hegel’s Subjective Notion with the “Institution.”

Sartre sets the scene well for the fused group as a multiplicity of individuals are brought together by an “Other,” passing from the bus queue of people all individually waiting for the same bus, to “Indirect Gatherings” such as the crowd attending a sports game, or protesting. Until the shared sentiment reaches a point where everyone is thinking the same thing, and any one of them can issue an order which each and every one present understands and obeys. Storming the Bastille or throwing up barricades, the individuals fuse together into a new collective subjectivity, the “Fused Group.”

But the single problematic which dominates this whole development is the threat of Thermidor, the problem of how it can be possible to “maintain the rage” (to use the words of Gough Whitlam in November 1975), of how to maintain that creative freedom found in the natural identity of an individual with a social totality, in the midst of radical social change.

In the “Pledged Group,” for example, all the members make a pledge that at pain of their own death they will never betray the group. This act of pledging - which sacrifices their own freedom as the sole means of guaranteeing their freedom against the betrayal of the others - typifies the hopelessness of all efforts to prevent the passage from creative freedom to institutional inertia: “the moment of freedom as unifying, translucent practice is *the moment of the trap*.” [p. 336] Every act of freedom, far from breaking down the walls of the prison actually just adds another brick to the wall.

The practico-inert is that generalised notion of institutions, as a field of human activity which is in fact dead, inert. As soon as a social movement recedes from the white heat of revolutionary practice, it is sedimented in the form of routinised, hierarchical, rule-governed bureaucratic patterns of social activity.

The Russian Revolution

The touchstone of this approach has to be Sartre’s analysis of the Russian Revolution. His conclusion does not rely on any contingency of the twentieth century, the isolation of the Revolution in backward Russia, the death of Lenin, the devastation of the War, the betrayals of social-democracy, the prematureness of the Revolution, the mistake of a dictatorship of the proletariat or any such thing. Sartre both justifies the Stalinist bureaucracy and the barbarism of the Purges, *and* deduces them as an ahistorical *logical* necessity.

“the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ was an optimistic notion, constructed too hastily through misunderstanding the formal laws of dialectical Reason: there was once a time when it was *too soon* for such dictatorship in the USSR: the real dictatorship was that of a self-perpetuating group which, in the name of a delegation which the proletariat had not given it, exercised power over the

bourgeois class which was in the process of being destroyed, over the peasant class and over the working class itself. From the point of view of the masses the sovereignty of this group was neither legitimate nor illegitimate: its practical legitimation was due to the fact that the sovereign constructed his own illegitimacy by his mistakes and crimes. This is the judgment of History. Today it is *too late*, and the problem which really arises is that of the **gradual withering-away of the State** in favour of broader and broader regroupments of other-directed serialities.

“And the reason why the dictatorship of the proletariat (as a real exercise of power through the totalisation of the working class) never occurred is that the very idea is absurd, being a bastard compromise between the active, sovereign group and passive seriality. Historical experience has shown quite undeniably **that the first moment in the construction of socialist society** - to consider it at the still abstract level of power - **could only be the indissoluble aggregation of bureaucracy, of Terror and of the cult of personality**. This first stage seems to be approaching its end, despite some terrible setbacks; and, in any case, *wherever* a new socialist regime is established today, the developing socialisation of half the world will produce this new revolution in a conjuncture and historical totalisation quite different from those which characterised the revolution of 1917. From our point of view, the impossibility of the proletariat exercising a dictatorship is formally proved by the fact that it is impossible for any form of group to constitute itself as a hyper-organism. Bureaucratic terror and the cult of personality are just another expression of the relation between the constituent dialectic and the constituted dialectic, that is to say, of the necessity that a common action as such (through the multiple differentiation of tasks) should practically reflect upon itself so as constantly to control and unify itself in the untranscendable form of an individual unit. It is *true* that Stalin was the Party and the State; or rather, that the Party and the State were Stalin. But his violence is an expression, in a specific process, of the violent contradiction between the two dialectics.” [p. 662, bold added]

But Sartre gives no clue as to how and when this “gradual withering away of the State” can be effected. Although his criticisms of Lenin’s policy in the Russian Revolution are substantial and worthy of consideration, we are still left with the logical deduction of the Terror and the Cult of Personality as “the first moment in the construction of socialist society,” and everything we have read in the *Critique* points to Thermidor as a necessary finality of every revolution, or minor reform, for that matter.

History

Sartre rejects the idea of historical determinism; as in a chess game “each blow dealt by the one is dodged or parried or blocked by the Other” and alludes to Game Theory to demonstrate the indeterminacy of history. It is clear enough however, that while justifiably rejecting the possibility of a worldwide “fused group” indefinitely holding on to the free creativity attained in the white heat of revolutionary change. The implication is that we must be reconciled to a world of the practico-inert, punctuated by moments of freedom in which the bricks are rearranged.

This is not to say that can be no progress and all struggle is hopeless. But, apart from brief interludes, the fundamental situation remains one in which an individual confronts a world of petrified social customs and institutions. Subjectivity is not with Sartre an essentially individual psychic entity though. The fused group manifests genuine creative subjectivity, interiorised and expressed by individuals. But genuine creative subjectivity of the kind manifested by the fused group seem to be an

essentially transitory entity. There does not seem to be any room in the ontology of the *Critique* for the construction of material forms of life in which freedom is manifested in qualitatively different and potentially expanded forms.

I don't think it can be justified to limit subjectivity to the absolute identity of individual and group consciousness: "in praxis there is not *Other*, there are only several *myselfes*." [p. 394-5] That kind of heat does of course always cool off. But wherever individual human beings position themselves in some real cultural-historical narrative, there is subjectivity. In most cases, the individual concerned did not create the narrative, but nevertheless, in making themselves a character within it, they take on the responsibility for recreating it. This conception differs from that of the practico-inert with its absolute dominance independence of individual subjectivity.

Despite taking 800 pages to elaborate the transition from inert collectivity to fused group to the practico-inert, and despite the presentation of a sophisticated conception of the interrelation of social and individual consciousness, Sartre fails to describe a dialectic of individual and social consciousness.

Subjectivity cannot be limited just to the white heat of revolutionary change. Revolutionary practice needs to be understood as part of a continuum inclusive of the construction of normal everyday life. Surely genuinely free social consciousness arises on the basis of a practical *critique* of existing institutions. If the concept is limited to those moments of tectonic movement, consciousness is reduced to a quasi-religious enlightenment. Doubtless, there are aspects of the Great French Revolution and the October Revolution of 1917, which are just like that, but isn't the Thermidor which followed these great historical moments reflective of the traumatic character of the events themselves?

"Critique" must be understood as a practical continuum, from the passive interiorisation of the Object, to the assimilation of the Object by the Subject to its own ends, right up to the subsumption of the Object under a new subjectivity - in other words, as a "totality" in the relativised Lukácsian sense.

The point is that revolutionary practice which brings about a new material form of life attains its aim, and to paint such an achievement as nothing more than a fortification of the practico-inert misses the point.