

Book



Reviews

THE MARXISM OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, by Wilfred Desan. Doubleday & Co., New York, 1965. 320 pp.

WILFRED DESAN UNDERTOOK an immensely difficult task in writing this summary of Sartre's *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*. The *Critique* is a dense, impenetrable book of nearly 800 pages; its ideas are often unfathomable; its vocabulary is personal and arbitrary; its structure and writing style inchoate. Sartre wrote the *Critique* between 1957 and 1960, the years of the Algerian crisis and DeGaulle's assumption of power. During this time, according to Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre sought to "protect himself by working furiously at the *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*. He did not work with the usual interruptions, erasures, tearing up and rewriting of pages; instead, working for hours at one stretch, he dashed from page to page without rereading what he had written, as if he were caught by ideas which his pen could not overtake even at a gallop. . . ."

The *Critique* fulfills Sartre's long-standing commitment. When he brought out *Being and Nothingness* in 1943 he promised to write a companion work which would provide a Marxist basis for existentialism. How this could be done puzzled some readers, who regarded the two philosophies as fundamentally incompatible. *Being and Nothingness* dealt entirely with the ontological necessity of individual choice; it was silent on the individual's relation to society as a whole. It therefore provided no ethical standard by which to evaluate the larger meaning of the choices that individuals made. So that, in Sartre's ontology, one choice was as good as another, and whether one decided to become, say, a revolutionary or

to buy a particular pair of shoes involved the same kind of anxiety, the same kind of conflict between the "En-soi" and the "Pour-soi," the same kind of freedom. Nothing seemed further removed from the Marxian conception of man and society than Sartre's preoccupation with individual choice. How, then, did he propose to bring Marxism and existentialism together? What did he mean by Marxism? It was to answer these questions that he wrote the *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*.

But it soon becomes clear from the text that Sartre's dialectics owes little to Marx. For Sartre, the movement of man in history is cyclical, not linear. The idea of progress, which lay at the heart of Marx's dialectics, has no place in Sartre's. Men, groups, societies, says Sartre, are condemned to repeat the same tragic experiences over and over. This assumption corresponds to the Greek view of life, not to the Western; it is absolutely at variance with Marx's.

Sartre postulates three stages in the history of society. The first is the stage of "seriality." By seriality Sartre means atomization, a serial society being merely the sum of its individual members. Such a society comes about because the practical activity of men — their "praxis" — gives rise to the conditions that limit their freedom; they come to depend on the objects that they create to fulfill their needs. Praxis thus turns into what Sartre calls the "practico-inert." In a practico-inert world the original ends, the free, creative activity of men, are swallowed up by the means. Life is reduced to routine and repetition.

The next stage is the group, which emerges because serial relations no longer answer the needs that called them forth.

The habits of practico-inertia are shattered, and a new mode of praxis arises. Sartre dwells at great length on the nature of the group: its genesis, its transformation, its anatomy. It surges up spontaneously, fusing the individuals in a common revolutionary project; it takes on a life of its own. To maintain the integrity of the group, its members swear to an "oath"; they agree to a covenant, as it were, to obey its commands. They thereby "interiorize" the group's functions, much as each individual cell in living matter contains all the characteristics of the whole organism.

Having brought the group into being, Sartre enters the Jacobin-Rousseauist phase of his *Critique*. He becomes remarkably lucid in celebrating the virtues of discipline and terror. In effect, he sanctions Rousseau's belief that the general will punishes men for their own good. According to Sartre, the group "en fusion" must force men to be free. "Terror," he writes, "is the beginning of humanity." Few philosophers have championed terror this way. It is oddly akin to DeMaistre's paean to the hangman as the symbol of public order. Traditionally, the revolutionary left has conceded the necessity of terror; but apart from the extreme Jacobins, such as Saint-Just and Blanqui, the left has not justified it as a positive good. How can murder, even for a lofty ideal, mark the beginning of humanity?

At any rate, after the group has done its work, and despite its attempts to maintain ancient solidarities, it begins to petrify, to fall back into practico-inertia. This is the third stage of Sartre's dialectic. Bureaucracy and specialized institutions seal the victories that have been won in battle and distribute the rewards to the individual members. Serial relations are resumed. Society now consists of an "ensemble" of burnt out groups presided over by a sovereign state. Sartre's remarks on the state are as pedestrian as they are brief and add nothing to what Marx said on the subject. For Sartre, the state is organized

force exercised in behalf of a privileged group; it is legitimated by habit and sanctified by ritual.

Why, then, do men obey the state? Obviously, says Sartre, because of the enormous power of the state, especially today, to "extero-condition" the masses, to atomize them, to shape their ideas, their tastes, their values. Sartre smites both the bourgeois and Communist states for extero-conditioning their peoples, but his sympathies and hopes obviously rest with the latter. The United States, of course, is the worst offender; it is the serialized society par excellence, the very model of practico-inertia. Sartre is an unreconstructed Calvinist when he is not a smoldering Jacobin.

WHAT, THEN, of the proletariat? Sartre still looks forward to revolution. The working class represents a potential group "en fusion," a fresh moment of the dialectic. But from all Sartre has said it must be assumed that this revolution, too, if it should come off, will degenerate into yet another form of seriality. The logic of Sartre's dialectic forbids giving the proletariat a privileged status in history. To Sartre, all of history is a "perpetual double movement of regrouping and petrification," and the proletariat is as subject to the imperatives of this movement as any previous class.

In short, Sartre is not a Marxist at all. Properly speaking, he is anti-Marxist because he denies the quintessence of Marxism—its historicity, its belief that the triumph of the working class will usher in the epoch of freedom. Sartre is right in refusing to accept this rigorous determinism, but he has substituted for it a determinism of another sort, one no less rigorous, for it is based, as we have seen, on the cycle of "double movement," "of regrouping and petrification."

Sartre complains that the "Marxists," meaning those who follow a given line and who think dogmatically, eliminate the individual from history. The complaint is just, and may even be lodged against Marx himself. To Marx, as to

Hegel, individual freedom comes in the culminating moment of history. Until that moment, man suffers under the tyranny of necessity. Sartre, however, keeps freedom *within* the dialectic; it is present at every moment. The individual is always at liberty to deny the conditions imposed by his past and by his surroundings; he is also at liberty to accept them; in any case, he freely chooses.

But now we are back to Sartre's old existential dilemma. Are all freedoms equivalent? Are the members of a serial multiplicity as free as the members of a revolutionary group? If they are, why choose revolution? Whatever the faults of the Marxian dialectic, it does provide an objective order of values. It is precisely because freedom is the culmination of history that each stage along the way represents an advance over the preceding stage. If freedom is an ultimate end the meaning of each act may be judged in relation to it. But if there is no such end what meaning can the "free" act have? How does one distinguish the freedom claimed by the civil rights movement from that claimed by the Ku Klux Klan (two groups presently "en fusion")? In Sartre's dialectic no distinction can be made.

The fact is that Sartre's freedom is absolute and unconditional, it is therefore meaningless. Merleau-Ponty, his one-time friend and close colleague, and a great philosopher in his own right, made this criticism of Sartre years before the *Critique* was written. Absolute freedom is no freedom.

ALBERT FRIED

BARBAROSA—THE GERMAN-RUSSIAN CONFLICT 1941-45, by Alan Clark. William Morrow and Company, New York, 1965, 522 pp. \$10.00.

IT'S GOOD THAT a generation reared in conditions of the cold war with the Soviet Union can find history books at hand such as this and also Alexander Werth's *Russia at War, 1941-45*). After all, there was a time when the greatest brunt of

the fighting against mankind's most terrible menace—Nazi Germany—was borne by the Red Army.

Unlikely though it seems, General Douglas MacArthur found, in a statement issued from beleaguered Corregidor, that "the hopes of civilization rest on the worthy banners of the courageous Russian Army." Recalling a lifetime of military study and experience, General MacArthur said "the scale and grandeur" of the Soviet effort at Moscow, "marks it as the greatest military achievement in all history."

How was it though, since Soviet Communism was as totalitarian as Nazi fascism, that the Russian people fought so well? Alan Clark, a 36-year-old British historian, quotes a letter in his possession, from a Russian who explains why he fought:

"Even those of us who knew that our government was wicked, that there was little to choose between the SS and the NKVD except their language, and who despised the hypocrisy of Communist politics—we felt that we must fight. Because every Russian who had lived through the Revolution and the thirties had felt a breeze of hope, for the first time in the history of our people. We were like the bud at the tip of a root which has wound its way for centuries under rocky soil. We felt ourselves to be within inches of the open sky.

"We knew that we would die, of course. But our children would inherit two things: A land free of the invader; and Time, in which the progressive ideals of Communism might emerge."

It's important that students today should learn in what unprecedented peril all of civilization was placed by the rise of Hitler Germany and its military attempt to conquer the world. It very nearly did. But the Nazis were defeated at Moscow. They were defeated at Stalingrad. They were defeated at Kursk. They were defeated at Berlin.

This well documented book, written with splendid verve and style explains why the Russians beat the Germans.