



**Colonialism and Neocolonialism**  
Jean-Paul Sartre

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## *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*

First published in French in 1964, *Colonialism and Neocolonialism* is a classic critique of French policies in Algeria in the 1950s and 1960s and inspired much subsequent writing on colonialism, post-colonialism, politics and literature. It had an important impact on the conduct of the Algerian war itself, and the break-up of the French colonial empire cannot be understood without reference to this key text. Sartre highlights key issues in the political debate at a time when colonial empires were crumbling. He analyses the discourses of colonialism and argues for the necessity of decolonization.

*Colonialism and Neocolonialism* is also famous for its controversial call for the use of violence in achieving political ends. It includes Sartre's celebrated preface to Fanon's classic *The Wretched of the Earth*. *Colonialism and Neocolonialism* has had a profound impact on French intellectual life, inspiring many other influential French thinkers and critics of colonialism, such as Albert Memmi, François Lyotard and Frantz Fanon.



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# *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*

*Jean-Paul Sartre*

*Translated by*

Azzedine Haddour,

Steve Brewer and

Terry McWilliams



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*Azzedine Haddour*

*Steve Brewer*

*Terry McWilliams*



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## *Preface*

### Sartre: the 'African Philosopher'

Robert J. C. Young

#### I

The English translation of Sartre's writings on colonialism and neocolonialism represents an important moment for both Sartre studies and postcolonial theory. With the striking exceptions of Lamouchi (1996) and Mudimbe (1988, 1994), few accounts of Sartre's work have grasped the significance of black cultures and anti-colonial struggles in his life and thinking. At the same time, while postcolonial theory customarily traces its overt intellectual and political origins through more recent theoretical developments back to Fanon, Memmi, Du Bois, Gramsci and Marx, the historical as well as the theoretical significance of Sartre's role and influence remains undervalued and unexamined.

Although some commentators routinely claim an unbridgeable divide between postcolonialism and the anti-colonial movements, Sartre represents a major theoretical pivot between them, undoing any easy differentiation and demonstrating the basis for their common political inheritances. Along with Marx, Sartre constituted one of the major philosophical influences on Francophone anticolonial thinkers and activists, and through them on postcolonial theory. Sartre stands out as the Western Marxist who was most conspicuously involved in the politics of the anti-colonial movements, both in terms of a developing preoccupation with resistance to colonialism in his work and in his own personal political activism. In these essays, Sartre's powerful example as an intellectual who was politically engaged at every level comes across in the combination of theoretical analyses, newspaper articles written in the immediacy of the political moment, and historical critiques.

Sartre was extensively concerned with colonial and 'Third-World' issues from 1948 onwards, from his first engagements with racism and negritude, to the triumph of revolutionary China in 1949, the colonial wars in Indo-China, Morocco and Algeria, the Cuban Revolution, American imperialism in the war in Vietnam, the Arab-Israeli conflict, as well as French immigration policies (Lamouchi 1996). The implications of his involvement can only be fully addressed in the wider context of his other writings in these areas: the famous Preface ('Black Orpheus') to Senghor's collection, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (1948), the chapter on colonial violence in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), the appendix on the position of African-Americans in the *Notebooks for an Ethics* (1983), and the many occasional writings and interviews on the Vietnam War which, once Algeria had succeeded in winning independence, became his major political preoccupation (see, for example, Sartre and Dedijer 1970). Sartre, an active political campaigner, increasingly began to integrate these issues into the preoccupations of his own work.

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The writings collected in this volume illustrate Sartre's developing response to colonialism: moving from the ethical to the political, from a preoccupation with individual freedom to intellectual and political commitment, and the moral demand for an assumption of responsibility for each individual's role in history. The essays demonstrate successively how he reformulated and sharpened the politics of negritude in Senghor, sketched out the limitations of colonial discourse and stereotypes *vis-à-vis* China, articulated the psychology of colonialism in Memmi (itself a nuanced response to his own Manichaean account of the colonial divide, subsequently developed by Fanon), articulated the power dynamics of neo- and postcolonialism in his analysis of the political role of Patrice Lumumba, and brutally confronted the French reading public with Fanon's revolutionary discourse of liberation by emphasizing the epistemological revolution that was taking place at the same time.

These essays therefore bring out a number of important factors both for Sartre himself and for postcolonial critique, beginning with the political background to Fanon and other activist anti-colonial writers, particularly with respect to the war in Algeria (Sartre's newspaper articles here should be read alongside those of Fanon in the FLN newspaper, *El Moudjahid*, collected in *Toward the African Revolution* (1964)). The essays also provide evidence of Sartre's political commitment as an intellectual, his radical placing of anticolonial struggle at the centre of the political agenda as a part of his commitment as a Marxist (particularly evident here in his analysis of the basis of colonialism in Algeria). Sartre foregrounds the way in which Marxism is a flexible body of ideas that requires theoretical elaboration and adaptation to specific circumstances, as well as renewal and theoretical input from new contexts and locations. Finally, these essays demonstrate Sartre's early recognition that the anti-colonial movements were not narrowly political campaigns but developed their own cultural and political positions through the elaboration of a revolutionary 'tricontinental' epistemology.<sup>1</sup>

## II

At a theoretical level, Sartre's influence on black Francophone intellectuals was in certain respects greatest from the period before his political radicalization. The development of what Merleau-Ponty

I use the term 'tricontinental' here, in preference to the term 'Third World', with reference to the articulation of the anti-colonial and anti-imperial movements at the first Conference of the Organization of Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America at Havana in 1966, known popularly as the 'Tricontinental'. The Tricontinental marked the initiation of a global alliance of those from the three continents of Africa, Asia and Latin America against imperialism, signalling a common commitment to social and political transformation. Postcolonialism, I suggest, as a body of tricontinental counter-knowledge positioned against Eurocentric discourses, would also better be called 'Tricontinentalism' (Young 2001).

called Sartre's 'ultra-Bolshevism' occurred relatively late in his career, and there is comparatively little in the early work, focused on the necessity of freedom, to suggest his later increasing preoccupation with social injustice at a global level. In *Being and*

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*Nothingness* (1943), Sartre rejects Marx's argument that consciousness is determined by the world, proposing instead freedom as the central characteristic of the condition of being human. Sartre rewrites Descartes's cogito as 'I am my choices' and 'I am my freedom'. Being human, for Sartre, is not constituted by any static, pre-existing essence; rather the essence of being human is dynamic, formed by the choices made by the individual. The individual, consequently, is not fixed but in a constant state of self-transformation and self-production, playing an active part within the masses as a conscious collection of individuals who make history. In certain respects, Sartre thus anticipates the performative basis of today's identity politics by several decades – except that for Sartre politics begins rather than ends with identity.

While anti-colonial intellectuals in metropolitan Paris were attracted by the anti-colonial and anti-racist stance of the Communist Party from the 1920s onwards, Sartre's position was also to prove engaging to those at the forefront of the later negritude movement who were trying to rework dominant conceptions of African and Caribbean identity and develop their own politico-cultural consciousness. Recalling Marx's remark in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* that 'men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted' (Marx 1973:146), Sartre denied that individuals had to be wholly determined by circumstance, economic or historical, suggesting rather that they possessed a responsibility for themselves and their way of being in the world which in certain ways was always chosen. The possibility of agency, of authenticity, of choice and freedom, formulated during the adverse circumstances of the war during the German Occupation, was immediately attractive to radical intellectuals from the French colonies since it was easily transferable to their own situation of resistance to colonial domination.

Sartre was the first philosopher who responded to his historical experiences of the war by reformulating his political and philosophical position. He became more and more preoccupied with the question of abusive power relations and the iniquity of the French resisting the Germans, but then, having been liberated by the Allies, themselves subsequently inflicting the same oppressive treatment upon those in their colonies who were also fighting for liberation, a hypocrisy first made evident in the indiscriminate bombing of the Muslim town Sétif in Algeria in 1945 just after VE day.

### III

Sartre thus came to his anti-colonialism through ethics rather than politics. During the war, he developed analyses of torture and anti-Semitism. He worked towards uncovering the basis of racism, trying to understand it phenomenologically at the individual level rather than as an ideology. How does ideology work in and through the individual? What makes the racist a racist? How can the torturer torture? What choices has he made? What is the experience of racism for those oppressed by it? Sartre was unusual not only in approaching racism in terms of its phenomenology, but also in associating it directly with the practice and ideology of the colonial system in which the system determines the language, the stereotypical formulas, of each particular individual colonist (Sartre 1976a:

In *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946), Sartre sought to understand the dynamics of the phenomenon of anti-Semitism. The basic premise of Sartre's text was taken from Richard Wright's observation that 'There is no Negro problem in the United States, there is only a white problem': 'Contrary to widespread opinion', Sartre responded, 'it is not the Jewish character that provokes anti-Semitism but, rather, ... it is the anti-Semite who creates the Jew' – Fanon would add that 'it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence' (Sartre 1995:152, 143; Fanon 1965:30). As a result, Sartre characterized anti-Semitism as 'a form of Manichaeism' in which the anti-Semite splits the people of the world into good and evil: 'Between these two principles no reconciliation is conceivable; one of them must triumph and the other be annihilated' (Sartre 1995:40–1). He, and subsequently Fanon, then adapted this schema from the European racialist environment to the colonial situation.

While Sartre focuses on the racism of anti-Semitism, his analysis is applicable, by inference, to all colonial ideologies supported by racism. The war showed him that life was not simply a series of existential choices against circumstance: that the domination of power turns the subject into an object: in this situation, freedom is constituted by taking responsibility to transform oneself back into an agent. According to Sartre, a refusal to accept that freedom, which for Sartre defines man, reduces the individual to a state of inauthenticity. In the situation of anti-Semitism, as Sartre acknowledges, the choice of freedom and assuming the responsibility of authenticity requires considerable courage. Where the individual is defined as subhuman on account of racism, one understandable reaction is to aspire to the group from which he or she is excluded ('thus the Jew remains the stranger, the intruder, the unassimilated at the very heart of our society' (Sartre 1995:83)). For Sartre, however, this would be to live in a situation of inauthenticity: for the Jew, authenticity 'is to live to the full his condition as a Jew; inauthenticity is to deny it or attempt to escape from it' (Sartre 1995:91). This alternative for the persecuted subject, to live in a state of authenticity or inauthenticity, was to inspire Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). For Fanon, the colonial subject is not only denied his or her freedom and reduced to an object; he or she is unable to be fully human at an individual level: colonial oppression works at the level of psychology as well as in material form. If existence precedes essence, as Sartre argued, then the essence of the colonized subject aspiring to a 'white mask' is one of inauthenticity and bad faith. Sartre's section in *Being and Nothingness* entitled 'The Look', one of the most acute analyses he ever wrote, was a particular inspiration for Fanon – and subsequently for Lacan in his account of the Gaze, as well as the many discussions of various looks and gazes that followed in European feminist and film theory. Fanon's genius was to recognize the implicit gender and class position in Sartre's account of how, at a phenomenological level, the individual experiences the Other as an object. Soon, the looker finds himself looked at in turn and becomes conscious of himself as an object, or rather of seeing himself seen as an object: '*I am no longer master of the situation*' (Sartre 1958:263–8). In Sartre's account of how a lack of self-worth is mediated by the look of the Other, Fanon recognized an insight into the mechanics of how colonialism was able to produce a sense of inferiority in colonial subjects, of the psychopathology by which the colonized individual was led to experience him or herself at one remove as an object. The look turns the subject into an object: 'I

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want you to feel, as I, the sensation of being seen. For the white man has enjoyed for three thousand years the privilege of seeing without being seen' (Sartre 1976a: 7). The colonial subject constantly oscillates between the two states, internalizing the colonial ideology of inferiority and being less than fully human – until he, or she, assumes responsibility and chooses authenticity and freedom. It is for this reason that *Black Skin, White Masks* is a liberationist text.

Sartre's Hegelian training enabled him to recognize that power was a dialectical phenomenon, that torturer and tortured, racist and victim, colonizer and colonized, the empowered and disempowered, were locked in a symbiotic relation in which the first could not escape the consequences of his relations with the second. The split between colonizer and colonized, internalized by Fanon to provide the kind of Manichaean schizo-culture so forcefully analysed at the beginning of *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), is drawn directly from Sartre's model in which colonizer and colonized are 'similarly strangled by the colonial *apparatus*, that heavy machine' (Sartre 1964:51). Caught up in that system, transformed into an oppressor or torturer, the colonizing subject also finds himself in a condition of ontological ambivalence: 'both the organiser and the victim', as Fanon put it, 'of a system that has choked him and reduced him to silence' (Sartre 1976a: 724; Fanon 1980:10).

#### IV

Sartre's insight that the Manichaean system of racism and colonization, apparently dividing colonizer from colonized, in fact generates dynamic mutual mental relations between colonizer and colonized which bind them in the colonial drama, was further elaborated by Albert Memmi in his demonstration that the dialectic also involved what Hegel had called the 'excluded middle': the spectral presence of the liminal, subaltern figures who slip between the two dominant antithetical categories. Sartre's response was to emphasize the dialectical aspect of his own account, suggesting that Memmi saw a situation where he also saw a system. Sartre stressed the systematic role that racism plays, so that the economic divisions of the colony are an effect of institutionalized racism: the white man is rich because he is white. This racial hierarchy, Sartre argued, the major ideological pivot of colonial ideology, worked by relegating colonial subjects to the status of subhuman. From this point of view, the constitutional liberation movements of the nationalist parties were based on nothing more, and nothing less, than the demand that colonized peoples be given human rights, or, as Fanon puts it, 'a string of philosophico-political dissertations on the themes of the rights of peoples to self-determination, the rights of man to freedom from hunger and human dignity, and the unceasing affirmation of the principle "one man, one vote"' (Fanon 1965:47). Western humanism and rights discourse, Sartre argues, had worked by excluding a majority of the world's population from the category of the human. The new humanism of Fanon, Guevara and Castro, and the anti-humanism of Althusser, were essentially founded on the same colonial problematic: that the racism of colonialism was degrading colonial (or semi-colonized) subjects to the category of the subhuman. What was required, therefore, was either to do away with the concept of humanism altogether, or, more positively, to

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articulate a new anti-racist humanism, which would be inclusive rather than exclusive, and which would be the product of those who formed the majority of its new totality. This was the basis for the emphasis, at the end of *The Wretched of the Earth* and in Che Guevara's magnificent 'Socialism and Man in Cuba' (1965) alike, on the necessity of the creation of a 'new man'. 'Let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love. ... We must strive every day so that this love of living humanity is transformed into actual deeds, into acts that serve as examples, as a moving force' (Guevara 1997:211–13).

Che Guevara, according to Hilda Gadea, was 'an avid Sartre admirer [and] an adept of existentialism' (Gadea 1973:36). In their debates about Sartre's work, they discussed not only his existentialism but also his presentation of racial problems in *The Respectful Prostitute* (1946). The slogan of the Cuban revolution – 'the revolution is a *praxis* which forges its ideas in action' – was itself fundamentally Sartrean in conception. The symbiotic and symbolic alliance between the two men was instantiated when they met during Sartre's visit to Cuba in 1960 – at midnight in the National Bank of Cuba, of which Guevara was at that time the director (Sartre 1961:148, 98). Sartre was deeply moved by the energy, intelligence and informal human warmth of the Cuban revolutionaries, remarking of Guevara, 'This Guevara had been made by the war. It had stamped its own intransigence on him. The revolution had given him his sense of urgency, his speed' (Sartre 1961:60). It was in Cuba that Sartre witnessed, according to Simone de Beauvoir, 'happiness that had been attained by violence': there Sartre 'realised the truth of what Fanon was saying: it is only in violence that the oppressed can attain their human status' (de Beauvoir 1968:503, 606). According to Sartre, Fanon and Guevara, it was through revolution that the oppressed could attain their own humanity as well as their freedom. 'At the level of individuals', wrote Fanon, 'violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction' (Fanon 1965:73). Sartre, who began by abhorring violence on ethical grounds, ended by advocating it as the only necessary counter-response by those subjected to it. This was a choice that, as for Nkrumah or Kaunda, was the product of historical necessity arising from the liberation wars in settler colonies, or against imperial domination, rather than a rejection of ethics as such. The corollary of this historical engagement was to emerge in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* where he interpolates the violence of colonialism and anti-colonial response at a philosophical and historical level: colonialism, in this analysis, consisted of a process in which uncontrolled violence was gradually transformed to a controlled violence, asserting a legitimacy of rule, as in Algeria (Sartre 1976a: 727).

Sartre's unremitting public support for the FLN and their objectives in Algeria, expressed in the Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* and elsewhere, was at the time an indictable offence. Despite himself requesting it, he escaped prosecution by the government, but the colonists tried to ensure that he paid the price. In January 1962, a bomb planted by the OAS destined for his apartment went off in the rue Bonaparte; it was placed by mistake on the floor above, where the apartment was totally wrecked (Horne 1977:503). Apart from his foundational analysis in 'Colonialism Is a System', Sartre's articles on Algeria are very much products of engaged moments in the violent history of the war. They bring out the radical position which he, unlike the vast majority of the

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population in France, had adopted. His antagonistic relations with the Communist Party after the war were the result in the first place of his dislike and distrust of Stalinism but also of his disagreement with the Communist Party line on the French colonies, particularly Algeria. When the Algerian war began, Sartre was, with Lyotard and Castoriadis' Trotskyist group, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, one of the few advocates of independence for Algeria opposed to an *Algérie française*. When it achieved independence in 1962, the FLN immediately banned the Communist Party.

## V

Sartre's Marxism was also radically different from the official contemporary version represented by the Communist Party. Between 1952 and 1954, he published a long critique of the Communist Party written from the position of a Marxist committed to the needs and rights of workers and ordinary people rather than the autocratic rule of the party (Sartre 1968). Sartre's profound relation to postcolonial theory begins with his important demonstration of the possibility of bringing Marxism into a productive, new relation with different systems, forms of thought and experience. This is because in doing so, Sartre showed himself closest among European Marxists to the contemporary models of socialism that were being developed in China, Africa, and Latin America. Although Marxism had been elaborated in new forms directed towards what was known as 'the East' since Sultan-Galiev became director of the Central Bureau of the Muslim Organizations of the Russian Communist Party, known as the Musburo, in 1919, it was the victory of Mao Tse-tung in China in 1949 which for the first time signalled a communist, anti-colonial (China was a 'semi-colony') revolution in the Third World, and the establishment of a specifically Third World or tricontinental form of Marxism. The Marxism of the anticolonial movements developed into very different forms from those of European Marxism (official and unofficial), articulating the universal principles of Marxism to local, vernacular conditions, particularly the needs of the peasantry, whether it be Mao Tse-Tung in China, the African socialism of the Senghors, Cabral and Nyerere, or the transculturation of Marxism to the conditions of Latin America by Mariátegui and Guevara.

Sartre's 'Colonialism is a System' constitutes a thorough analysis of the mechanics of colonial economics that shows him fully immersed in the perspective developed by Marx, who argued that colonialism presented capitalism in naked form, stripped of the decorous clothing of European bourgeois society (Marx 1973:324). Colonialism, Sartre was to add, also operates in a different temporality from Western capitalism, in the time of its secondary system; Fanon in turn would point to differences of temporality within the colonial domain, a 'time-lag' between the cosmopolitan modernity of the nationalist leaders and the peasantry (Sartre 1991:401; Fanon 1965:87). Sartre shows a remarkable understanding of contemporary 'Third-World' differences of perspectives and need, in his emphasis on the questions of land and the agrarian problem, of the appropriation of land and resettlement, and, particularly, of landlessness, which have been central to the problems of many colonies in Africa, Asia and Latin America. At the same time, despite the specificity of its historical and economic analysis of Algerian colonialism, Sartre's

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essay is remarkable in emphasizing the systematic basis of colonialism. In generalizing his account of Algeria through the claim of his title, Sartre did not mean that there was a single colonial system everywhere and at all times, but rather that colonialism represented a deliberate and systematic form of exploitation that could be analysed as such. Fanon took this a stage further, so that Sartre's Manichaean system provided the fundamental model for his much more abstract account of colonialism and anti-colonial resistance in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon, as Homi Bhabha has observed, 'rarely historicises the colonial experience' (Bhabha 1986: xiii). This was a deliberate political strategy: it was the abstracted universalism of Fanon's analysis that enabled *The Wretched of the Earth* to become, in Stuart Hall's words, 'the Bible of decolonisation'.

## VI

By combining his pursuit of ontology with one of violent resistance to power, dominant and exploitative, Sartre set up the dialectical basis for anti-colonial struggle, followed by Fanon, which was characterized by the coincidence of systematic and existential accounts. Just as *The Wretched of the Earth* begins with a general account of the colonial world but ends with the particularity of case histories of individual patients who had suffered psychological traumas during the Algerian War of Independence, so Sartre's emphasis on the systematic basis of colonialism was not made at the expense of his earlier affirmation of the significance and authenticity of individual subjective experience, and of its value as a determinant of political action. The conflictual dialectic of subject and object in Sartre's phenomenology formed the theoretical basis for his Marxism which started out not from the determining material conditions of the world but from the subject as agent, acting his or her choices out in the conditions of history. The *Critique of Dialectical Reason* represents Sartre's attempt to resolve this dialectic, to combine his ethics of individual freedom, of responsibility and authenticity with the larger processes of history. In the section entitled 'Racism and Colonialism as Praxis and Process', the inspiration for the opening chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre was the first (and last) European Marxist theorist to develop a theory of history in which colonialism, and the endemic violence of the colonial regime, was a major component, and which gave a significant role to anti-colonial resistance (Young 1990). Sartre's account of historical determinism remains unique in the way in which he combined subjectivity, the consciousness of acting as an historical agent, with the totality of determining historical processes. As Fredric Jameson describes it, such a conjuncture in Sartre involves not 'a reconciliation of contraries, but rather ... a kind of unified field theory in which two wholly different ontological phenomena can share a common set of equations and be expressed in a single linguistic or terminological system' (Jameson 1971:208). This constitutes an accurate description not only of Sartre, but also of Fanon's work, and through him of postcolonial theory in general. Deeply drawn to Sartre by the latter's public commitment to anticolonial politics, Fanon was also attracted to Sartre's position at a more philosophical level because of its existentialist articulation of objective materialist history with the subjective experience of its operations. It is through Sartre and Fanon that postcolonial theory acts out its distinctive combination of anti-colonial



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Marxism and the charting of psychological effects and modes of resistance. It shares a common dialectic of equations, operating as a disjunctive ontological synthesis.

Through Fanon, postcolonial theory thus draws on the very domain of Marxist theory that the whole theoretical drive of French Marxism since the 1960s was concerned to refute: Sartrean exis-tentialism. While these structuralist and poststructuralist theoretical manoeuvres were being carried out, anti-colonial theory was at the same time being developed through a transposition of Sartre's Marxist humanism, and his theoretically incompatible alliance of Marxism and subjectivity, of human *praxis* as the source of meaning and political action. Since the Althusserian attack on Sartre, so rigorously and effectively deployed with respect to his Hegelianism, only anti- and postcolonial theory have continued to bring together this impossible but necessary articulation of the right to subjectivity with assimilation into the objectivity of history. The necessary, disjunctive relation between the two, or, put differently, between the universal and the local, was to coincide with the basis for African socialism in its most elaborate theorization in the work of Léopold Senghor.

## VII

While Lévi-Strauss's and Althusser's critiques of Sartre made the effective openings that enabled the later postcolonial deconstruction of the ethnocentric premises of European philosophy, it was Sartre's work, particularly of the 1940s, that was most influential on postwar French anti-colonial intellectuals. Sartre exerted a powerful pressure on the black Francophone writers who came to Paris in the 1940s and 1950s, in particular, Césaire, Fanon, and Memmi. In Paris they also encountered the work of other Francophone African writers, particularly Senghor and Diop, who, operating within the orbit of the Pan-African movement, had developed the reaffirmation of black culture in the form of *Négritude*. As a result, Francophone African writing became something of a synthesis of the philosophy of negritude with Sartrean existentialism. This was broadly the position of the great journal of African consciousness founded by Alioune Diop in 1947, *Présence africaine*, of whose editorial board Sartre was a member (Mudimbe 1992). It was *Présence africaine* that organized the legendary First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists at the Sorbonne in September 1956. Sartre worked closely with Senghor, Fanon, and Memmi, writing prefaces to what in all cases became their most famous books. Sartre's prefaces read like a chronicle of the successive positions adopted by Francophone African anti-colonialists: from the concern with the revolutionary expression of repressed cultures and subjectivities in Senghor's anthology, to an identification with the violence endorsed in Fanon's treatise on colonial revolution, to the consequential problems of neocolonial interference by Western interests suffered by Lumumba after independence in the face of his own aspirations for a just and humane free society in the Congo.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon cites Sartre's remark in 'Black Orpheus' that it is 'no coincidence that the most ardent poets of negritude are at the same time the most militant Marxists' (Fanon 1986:133). Negritude, which developed out of the context of a militant metropolitan diasporic anti-colonial radicalism, utilized any and all available

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sources to formulate its cultural redefinition which would enable African colonized subjects to transform themselves from the object status of abject deculturalization to which they had been reduced. No more than for Sartre, the essence of blackness that they pursued was not conceived of as a prior entity in existence but as the product of life-choices: Africanism, negritude, like anti-colonialism, were the products of situational engagement. Negritude, wrote Sartre in 'Black Orpheus', is 'an act more than ... a disposition' (Sartre 1976b: 42). Sartre's famous preface to Senghor's anthology of 1948 has received more attention than any other of his writings in this sphere. His complex account of the dialectic of white and black worlds, and his affirmation of 'the ultimate unity which will draw together all the oppressed in the same combat' in the colonies, was highly influential on Fanon (Sartre 1976b: 15). *Black Skin, White Masks* in its own way constitutes an analysis of the colonial thinking that negritude was trying to break away from, while *The Wretched of the Earth* provides the basis for the renewal of selfhood through the reversal of anti-colonial violence which, according to Fanon, enables accession to human status. In both, Fanon was pursuing the possibility of a new ontology and epistemology of liberation.

In *The Invention of Africa*, V. N. Mudimbe describes Sartre as 'an African Philosopher', not merely on account of his wide influence on African intellectuals, nor even on account of the fact that 'by rejecting both the colonial rationale and the set of culturally eternal values as bases for society, [Sartre, in *Black Orpheus*] posited philosophically a relativist perspective for African social studies' (Mudimbe 1988:83, 86). For Mudimbe, Sartre symbolically became a 'Negro philosopher' because it was Sartre who recognized the complexity of African epistemological roots. Sartre was one of the few European intellectuals to recognize in Senghor, Fanon, Memmi and others that, together with the anti-colonial movements, the pursuit of political liberation had been accompanied by the development of new forms of knowledge, a counter-modernity set against that of the West. In his Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre thus emphasized Fanon's tricontinental perspective not only as a revolutionary liberationist doctrine but also as fundamentally a new epistemology.

In the complex history of the liberation movements, one thing is clear, namely that at a political and intellectual level, the work of the tricontinental political-intellectuals typically involved a syncretic transformation of available radical discourses, above all Marxism, through its conjunction with the specificities of different geographical, political, cultural and historical conditions. At the same time, anti-colonial activists were also concerned to develop new kinds of knowledge, of anthropology, history, literature, politics, generating a counter-modernity that cannot be separated from the knowledge that has more recently been developed in the academy, which has been characterized as 'postcolonial'. The cosmopolitan, international structure of the anti-colonial movements helped to construct a formation of intellectual and cultural resistance, a huge production of philosophical and cultural knowledge, that flourished alongside anti-colonial political practice and the material forms of resistance, from strikes to insurrections. Postcolonial theory is fundamentally the product of that anti-colonial, anti-eurocentric political knowledge and experience and its construction of a tricontinental modernity. Postcolonialism represents a name for the intrusion of this radically different epistemology into the academy, the institutional site of knowledge, globally dominated,

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hitherto, by the knowledge criteria and positionality of the West. Sartre's example as an intellectual committed to social and political transformation on a global scale, suggests that while much of the role of post-colonialism as an academic practice has been to challenge the basis of established, eurocentric knowledge in the cultural sphere, it must also continue to work in the spirit of the anti-colonial movements by further developing its radical political edge, forging links between its engaged intellectual activism and specific, often local political practices designed to end oppression and enforce social justice.

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## *Introduction*

### Remembering Sartre

*Azzedine Haddour*

#### *I*

Sartre wrote this book as a series of essays at a time when colonial empires were crumbling. His project is twofold: to analyse the discourses of colonialism and neocolonialism and to argue for the necessity of decolonization. Sartre delineates a number of what he calls 'situations' in which he intervenes to critique the nefarious effects of these two discourses respectively on the colonized and the Third World. First, in his review of Cartier-Bresson's photographs of China, he announces the end of the picturesque. Secondly, he criticizes the political structures of an old colonial France governed by an ideology constructed in the nineteenth century, structures that perpetuated political instability and demanded urgent modernization. Thirdly, he rallies behind an incendiary Third-Worldism, engaging with the writings and political thought of Memmi, Fanon and Lumumba. Let us first deal with the specificities of each of the essays before re-situating Sartre within the field of postcolonial studies.

Sartre wrote 'From One China to Another' as a preface to Cartier-Bresson's work.<sup>1</sup> Borne out of war, the picturesque, Sartre reminds us, cannot comprehend difference. Sartre prefigures the arguments of Roland Barthes in 'Myth Today' and Edward Said in *Orientalism*, i.e., the fabricated quality of the mythic idea and its orientalizing intent. Sartre writes: '[The photographers] seek out a Chinese who looks more Chinese than the others; in the end they find one. They make him adopt a typically Chinese pose and surround him with *chinoiseries*. What have they captured on film? *One Chinaman*? No ... the Idea of what is Chinese' (this volume, p. 18). Taken at high speed, Cartier-Bresson's snapshots cannot indulge in 'gossip' and do not even have the time to be superficial. In Sartre's view, the Chinese photographed by Cartier-Bresson do not look Chinese enough. Sartre thanks him for his 'nominalism' (this volume, p. 19), for demystifying the picturesque that takes refuge in the convention of language and hides behind mythic concepts. The photography of Cartier-Bresson, Sartre concludes, 'announces the end of tourism. It gently teaches us, without useless pathos, that poverty has lost its picturesque quality and will never recover it.'

'Colonialism is a System' was originally given as a speech at Wagram on 27 January 1956.<sup>2</sup> Sartre, who was in favour of peace, protested against France's policy of pacification during the Algerian war. He warned against the mystification of neocolonialism and undertook a detailed analysis of French colonialism in Algeria, a system put in place in the nineteenth century, supported and maintained by liberal ideology. The theory of imperialism, Sartre contends, was not formulated by Lenin but by the liberal ideologue Jules Ferry.

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Sartre elaborates on the systemic violence of colonialism in his preface to Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*.<sup>3</sup> He is careful to differentiate between the subjects of ideology and of colonialism, between the insidious function of the former and naked systemic violence of colonial oppression. He captures the terms of the dialectics of having and being thus: 'Colonialism denies *human rights* to people it has subjugated by violence, and whom it keeps in poverty and ignorance by force, therefore, as Marx would say, in a state of "sub-humanity"'. Racism is inscribed in the events themselves, in the institutions, in the nature of the exchanges and the production. The political and social statuses reinforce one another: since the natives are subhuman, the Declaration of Human Rights does not apply to them; conversely, since they have no rights, they are abandoned without protection to the inhuman forces of nature, to the "iron laws" of economics' (this volume, p. 50). He reiterates the crux of his argument in 'Colonialism is a System'; he elaborates on the dialectical relationship involving the oppressor and oppressed first discussed in his *Anti-Semite and Jew* and *Black Orpheus*: 'A pitiless reciprocity binds the colonizers to the colonized, their product and their destiny' (p. 53). He presents the colonizers and their victims both as 'strangled by the colonial *apparatus*, that heavy machine constructed at the end of the Second Empire, under the Third Republic, and which, after giving every satisfaction to the colonizers, is turning against them' (p. 49) to crush them. He thanks Memmi for reminding us in his book that colonialism carries the seeds of its own destruction. What Memmi has shown forcefully, argues Sartre, is that the logic of colonialism would lead not only to the self-destruction of the system, but to the affirmation of the colonized 'national selfhood'.

*Le Monde* approached Sartre to comment on the testimonies of the mobilized reservists that exposed the issue of torture in Algeria. Sartre wrote an article entitled 'An Enterprise of Demoralization'. The article was regarded as an incitement to violence and was rejected by *Le Monde*. Sartre published it in *Les Temps Modernes* with a new title parodying Jean Nohain's popular radio programme. Nohain used to present a needy family and, with the self-congratulatory 'You are Wonderful', urge his audience to help them out. The donations heaped upon this needy family expressed a 'moment of national generosity. To the rhythm of Jean Nohain's weekly miracles, France kept on dreaming and unwittingly sliding towards the age of consumerism.'<sup>4</sup> This 'moment' was nothing but a myth. Sartre's parody serves to demystify the rhetoric of national generosity which Nohain came to embody by exposing the lies and conceit of the media and cowardice of the French people for not facing up to the reality of France's hideous politics. 'The newspapers court us', Sartre writes, 'they want to make us believe that we are good. When the radio or the television ask us for a five-franc piece, they call their programmes: "You are Wonderful"; that is enough to make us run from the Porte de Saint-Ouen to the Porte d'Italie at midnight. But we are not wonderful. No more than we are naive. The illusory community of decent people is quite simply that of the readers of *France-Soir*. If we refuse to investigate the French truth ourselves, when we are capable of piling up our old mattresses on top of our 4CVs and throwing them at the feet of some Jean Nohain, it is because we are afraid. Afraid of seeing our true faces naked' (this volume, p. 58). Sartre provides similar insights to those of Barthes in *Mythologies*: myth works to depoliticize its signifiers; it hides the truth. 'Concealing, deceiving and lying,' Sartre points out, 'are a duty for those who inform France' (pp. 55–6). What is concealed is the fact

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that the 'French soldiers are massacring at random in the streets of Algiers before the hardened eyes of the European population'. Jean Nohain kept congratulating his enchanted audience with: 'You are Wonderful'; Sartre retorted: 'We are all Murderers'.<sup>5</sup>

After the *coup de force* of 13 May 1958, de Gaulle announced that he was willing to return to power. In 'The Constitution of Contempt', Sartre denounces as blackmail the referendum which gave de Gaulle special powers to change the constitution. He advised the voters to say 'non', just as he would urge them to vote 'non' in the 1961 referendum on the issue of linking Algeria's auto-determination with the condition of setting up provisional institutions to mediate between the FLN and the *ultras*. Sartre perceives in the return to power of de Gaulle the spectre of Bonapartism jeopardizing France's democratic institutions. In 'The Pretender',<sup>6</sup> 'The Constitution of Contempt',<sup>7</sup> 'The Frogs who Demand a King',<sup>8</sup> 'The Analysis of the Referendum'<sup>9</sup> and 'The Sleepwalkers',<sup>10</sup> Sartre voices this concern. He also warns that the fascist *ultras*, whose *coup de force* brought de Gaulle back to power, might hold the reins of his governance.

A decade after the end of Second World War, the once victimized France swapped positions with the Nazis and Fascists, the perpetrators of torture. 'A Victory'<sup>11</sup> appeared in *L'Express*, on 6 March 1958; it was written as a response to Henri Alleg's *La Question* which had been published on 17 February 1958 by Les Éditions de Minuit. In his book, Alleg talks about his experience as a victim of torture. The French Government seized this issue of *L'Express*, and banned Alleg's book. Sartre denounces torture and elaborates on the dialectics of the victim and the perpetrator. As Contact and Rybalka rightly point out, twentieth-century ethics could no longer eschew the question of torture and Sartre's intervention is crucial in this respect.<sup>12</sup>

In terms which evoke Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre describes the perpetrators of torture as 'sadists bent over wrecks of human flesh' (this volume, p.68), who know nothing about their victims but only 'their cries, their wounds and their suffering'. Like the colonial system which creates both the colonizer and the colonized as two protagonists involved in the colonial drama, torture produces the victim and the perpetrator. 'In this business, the individual does not count; a kind of stray, anonymous hatred, a radical hatred of man takes hold of both torturers and victims, degrading them together and each by the other. Torture is this hatred, set up as a system, and creating its own instruments' (this volume, p. 71). Sartre warns that torture has become a semi-clandestine institution undermining the premises of the democratic principles of French society. In Sartre's critique, the victim and perpetrator of torture interact dialectically to constitute the speculum which reflects the ugly image of France. In *Torture: Cancer of Democracy*, Pierre Vidal-Naquet conjures up this image thus: 'France made general use of the practices of torture, summary execution, and large-scale deportation. It is also known that many of these habits have overflowed into France itself.'<sup>13</sup> The Algerian War, with its excess of violence, undermined not only the political institutions of the Fourth Republic, but also the Declaration of Human Rights upon which French democracy and government rested. Tacitly as well as consciously, such violence affected the political unconscious of the French in general, and of a generation of thinkers and philosophers in the period between the 1950s and 1970s, who became preoccupied with issues of power, discourse, ethics and difference.

In Sartre's view, *The Wretched of the Earth* represents 'the moment of the boomerang,

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the third stage of violence': a returning violence that comes back to hit its perpetrators.<sup>14</sup> He examines this moment in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. According to him, the colonial situation produced the native and the colonialist as a couple implicated in the same violence. Sartre argues that colonial violence was never static: it had to 'change in order to remain the same'.<sup>15</sup> This violence to which the natives were subjected was experienced consequently as a process, determined by the expropriation of the colonized, the pulverization of their social structures, and their exclusion from the colonizing social institutions. The process of super-exploitation of the natives was produced by a petrified ideology and maintained by force. Their objective condition – i.e., their chronic malnutrition, their galloping demographic growth, their under-employment, famine, diseases, etc. – was a 'controlled process'.<sup>16</sup> In order to overcome their objective condition, Sartre argues, the colonized must confront the total negation to which they are subjected by another negation, violence with violence.<sup>17</sup> The violence involving colonizer and colonized was nothing but the reciprocal interiorization of a single oppression, that of the colonizer. Sartre makes it clear that there is a fundamental difference between the gratuitous violence of the colonizer and that of the colonized which 'is not an absurd storm, nor the resurrection of savage instincts, nor even an effect of resentment' (this volume, p. 147–8). In Sartre's view the violence of the colonized 'is no less than man reconstructing himself'. Critics hasten to attack Sartre's incendiary language but overlook the fact that violence was generated by colonial Europe which, propelled by this violence, is now reaching 'a mad and uncontrollable speed' and 'heading toward the abyss'.

In 'The Political Thought of Patrice Lumumba',<sup>18</sup> Sartre engages with the political problems of Third-World countries and more specifically with Africa's thwarted decolonization. He shows that in the case of the Belgian Congo retreating colonialism was soon replaced by rapacious imperialism. He explains that the colonial administration urged the Belgian government to grant independence to the Congo in order to swap the colonial regime for neocolonialism. Through education and the division of labour it had introduced, colonialism managed to create and stratify social classes which would serve its interests. The problem of Lumumba resides in the fact that he did not suspect that 'the imperialist governments and the large companies, confronted with the colonial crisis, had decided to liquidate the classic forms of oppression and the detrimental ossified structures that had developed during the course of the preceding century. He was unaware that the old mother countries wished to entrust nominal power to "natives" who would govern, more or less consciously, according to colonial interests; he was unaware that the accomplices or straw men had already been chosen in Europe, that they all belonged to the class recruited and trained by the Administration, to the petty bourgeoisie of employees and civil servants, to *his own class*. This ignorance was to be his downfall' (this volume, p. 175). Lumumba brought his own class to power and set about governing against its interests. Reiterating Fanon's critique of the pitfall of bourgeois nationalism, Sartre shows how the assassination of Lumumba sealed an unholy alliance between the black bourgeoisie and imperialism. Sartre writes: 'the dead Lumumba ceased to be a person and became Africa in its entirety, with its unitary will, the multiplicity of its social and political systems, its divisions, its disagreements, its power and its impotence: he was not, nor could he be, the hero of pan-Africanism: he was its



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