

Phl 421: Sartre, ProfLotz, Handout 10: Critical Points from the French Marxist Left

1. Specific points, BN

- a. Sartre's concept of situation is important for the social-political reception of the book, as it defies the criticism that Sartre thinks about freedom only in relation to isolated individuals; in fact, according to S, we can only be free if we are *limited*; freedom is a relation to the *given*
- b. However, although his philosophy *tends* towards a concept of freedom as *practical* liberation, he does not take this step; reason for this failure = if we are *ontologically* free, why then do we have the need to *become* free?
- c. Existentialism shares therefore with Marxism the concern for the everyday situation of human beings; we are in the world
- d. All examples of being-with-others are bourgeois examples
- e. His concept of being-with-others does not offer any space of thinking about social organizations and social institutions
- f. The *historical* essence of social relations is absent
- g. Sartre's concept of "having" and possessions remains bourgeois; he remains anthropological; he does not see the historical specificity of property relations; i.e., in this case of capitalism
- h. His concept of money is inappropriate
- i. The concept of anxiety seems to echo the "crisis" of our times; so, to celebrate it as something positive remains ideological

2. General after publication

- a. Communist paper *Action* launched a critique of S, it was vicious; his philosophy was displayed as anti-worker, anti-revolutionary, anti-political, etc.; his philosophy displays individualism and is the enemy of the working class
- b. S tried to defend himself, but in all cases was again criticized; so, as a consequence, he moved away from the French CP; overall, his philosophy was also a contender for the official CP doctrine, insofar as he focused on action, practice, engagement, etc.; so, S's philosophy could not *simply* be dismissed as a bourgeois contemplative philosophy
- c. Mougins: rejection of Sartre's concept of subjectivity; however, this lead again to a travesty of Marxist determinism
- d. Lukacs: S was not too far away from Lukacs who also developed in HCC a new way of thinking about history as active, ethical, and political engagement; Lukacs mainly criticizes the focus on the individual, but he does notice the practical core of Sartre's philosophy; S does not have a concept of history, of historical agents, and of historical change
- e. Lefebvre: S does not see the collective relation to nature, i.e., the economic organization of society; this gets lost in S's concept of consciousness; Sartre only

offers a “pseudo-solution” of freedom, insofar as he has no collective and no political concept of freedom; Lefebvre: S speaks for the “decadent class”

f. Merleau-Ponty: you read it

3. Response

- a. Sartre wrote tons of essays in which he criticized orthodox Marxist for being unable to develop a concept of revolutionary subjectivity
- b. The article *Materialism and Revolution* is a good example for this critique, but he again fails to address the problem of history; this article and other can be read as a critique of the doctrine of the CP, which S accuses of choking the worker’s freedom in mythical doctrines and bureaucratic apparatuses
- c. This is also the main reason why S was the main philosopher in Europe who developed a deep relation with anti-colonialism and, through the Vietnam war, imperialism
- d. For a while S participated in a resistance group organized by the CP, *Rassemblement Democratique Revolutionnaire*, and moved even towards integrating the concept of alienation into his own thinking (=“humanist Marxism”), but his engagement failed and he moved away from the CP (until the mid 50s)
- e. Ultimately, S develops in CDR a new phenomenology of groups and of class consciousness that can survive within a structural concept of history