

## Phl 421: Sartre, ProfLotz, Handout 11: Notes on *Materialism and Revolution*, 1947

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### 1. Materialism

- a. Dialectical materialism positions itself against metaphysics; however, S wonders how one can make basic assumptions about the relation between spirit and matter without the inclusion of metaphysics (162)
- b. Engels tries to eliminate subjectivity in his philosophy of nature. S argues that Engels turns subjects into objects without properly reflecting on the process through which he turns himself into the objective *eye* (163); remember: intentionality is absolute for S
- c. Experience is always first; for example, temperature is *first* a phenomenon of the for-itself before it can be grasped as quantity (164)
- d. If it is true that dialectical materialism presupposes that the real is rational (i.e., follows dialectical development), where does it get its *certitude*, i.e., something subjective, from; given that materialism eliminates the for-itself; it can only work with scientific probabilities
- e. Materialism can argue that consciousness is an effect of a material cause, but the relation between thought and object is not causal, thought “expresses” the object; i.e., intentionality is absolute, causality is itself a phenomenon (162)
- f. The causality that the materialist operates with does not lead to any totalities; the effect cannot contain more than what is in the cause; however, dialectical materialism operates with totalities (the whole, process, “the” society, “the” history, etc.); in addition, totalities are presupposed in the idea of evolutionary or historical progression (165)
- g. Marx begins with the “richest notion” (the whole, the concrete), but science begins with the most abstract notion (laws, principles, etc.), science cannot develop a theory that shows that the parts are *contained* in the whole
- h. Dogmatic Marxists want to believe in science, but reject all principles on which good science is built upon, such as reflection, critique, skepticism, anti-dogmatism, anti-authority) (167) [this is a critique of soviet style dogmatic Marxism in France]
- i. **Most importantly, materialism cannot explain the constitution of “revolutionary class consciousness” (171), i.e., Sartre argues that his theory of the for-itself is needed for explaining the *consciousness of the oppressed class of itself* (170); “Never will a state of the world produce a consciousness of class” → that’s why we need revolutionaries, that’s why we need political and historical agents; materialism cannot explain the premise of its own theory, namely that the working class will overturn the state of affairs; there is a rupture, freedom, that we need to take into account; Sartre argues that without the constitution of the *class as an agent*, which cannot be explained by cause and effect, the present condition cannot be overcome; S argues from now on for the primacy of political action, philosophy has to be politically engaged**

### 2. Materialism as a weapon

- a. Given all these problems, in particular the attempt of materialists to eliminate subjectivity, S proposes to use materialism *pragmatically*, i.e. as a social weapon to battle idealisms. Since idealism is taken as a doctrine of the dominating class, materialism

becomes the ideological weapon of the oppressed class (166); in fact, Marx proposes something like this in his early writings

- i. "In the struggle against that state of affairs, criticism is no passion of the head, it is the head of passion. It is not a lancet, it is a weapon. Its object is its *enemy*, which it wants not to refute but to *destroy*. [...] Criticism does not need to make things clear to itself as regards this object, for it has already settled accounts with it. It no longer assumes the quality of an *end-in-itself*, but only of a *means*. Its essential pathos is *indignation*, its essential work is *denunciation*." (Marx, Contributions to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Introduction)
  - b. As history shows, materialism was always the doctrine of revolutionary attitudes (S mentions Epicurus)
3. The revolutionary
- a. Revolution = profound change of property relations (unfortunately S does not say much more about this, as it could have lead him to say more about the constitution of society...) (167); here again, S does not pay much attention to structures of society constituted by social-economic categories
  - b. The revolutionary speaks to a *particular* class, although his position is *universal*; the ruling class speaks to the entire society, although his social position is *particular*
  - c. The revolutionary wants the destruction of the oppressing class; she is not an insurgent (168)
    - i. Transcendence of situation towards the future
    - ii. Comprehends history as a totality
    - iii. Is the historic agent
    - iv. Realizes the present from the standpoint of a future humanity
    - v. Standpoint of labor
    - vi. Revolutionary solidarity
    - vii. Thought = action
  - d. The ideology of the ruling class is based on the premise (168)
    - i. that one is on earth by divine right (unquestioned, everything is "there" for them)
    - ii. that one has the right to exist
    - iii. that the world is made for them
    - iv. that they command
  - e. The position of the working class is based on the premise (169)
    - i. that it receives its existence via the ruling class
    - ii. that one needs to struggle for existence
    - iii. that one does not have the right to exist (hence struggle)
    - iv. that there is no "divine" place in society for it
    - v. that the privileges of the ruling class need to be destroyed
    - vi. that the rights that the ruling class as invented need to be destroyed
    - vii. that values that are declared to be universal by the ruling class are in truth only particular and instruments of oppression (170)
  - f. The revolutionary speaks
    - i. For the entire class
    - ii. From the standpoint of humanity

4. Revolutionary philosophy shows that
  - a. Human beings are contingent (no divine right, no aristocracy, no natural claim to govern, etc.)
  - b. Collectively established orders can be overcome
  - c. That the current values, even if declared as universal values, reflect the particular social position of the ruling class
  - d. Can only disclose itself to the oppressed (172)
5. Conclusions
  - a. "Revolutionary man must be a contingent being [here EXISTENTIALISM], unjustifiable but free, entirely immersed in the society that oppresses him [here MARXISM], but capable of transcending this society by his efforts to change it. Idealism [RULING CLASS] mystifies him in that it binds him by rights and values that are already given; it conceals from him his power to devise roads of his own. But materialism also mystifies him, by depriving him of his freedom. The revolutionary philosophy [EXISTENTIAL MARXISM] must be a philosophy of transcendence" (170)
  - b. **Here is S's blow: contemporary Marxism is dogmatic, mechanistic, fears freedom and risk, smuggles in a priori knowledge where there is none, and reduces history to a developing idea [i.e., S. argues that it falls back onto Hegelian idealism] (171); for Sartre, without freedom "the triumph of socialism is not assured at all" (172)**
  - c. Surprising overall point 1: without a philosophy of freedom (which the Marxist take to be a form of idealism) Marxism is a form of idealism!
  - d. Surprising overall point 2: though S states that the CP is the only revolutionary party, he criticizes the party of having no revolutionary philosophy, i.e., they need to sober up and include existentialism as a philosophy of freedom into their doctrine...
6. Looking forward
  - a. In chapter one of *Search for a Method* S unleashes a similar critique: contemporary Marxism in France (around 1955) "stopped" (21) to be a "living Marxism" (26) and fell back on dogmatic presentations of a "truth a priori" (27) and "scholasticism" (28); the main problem, S argues, is that in the official versions "history is made without self-awareness" (29) [Uhhh... here we go] and that, as he says with Marx, "men themselves [...] make their history" (31); so, Sartre – in line with other so called "Western" Marxists, such as the Frankfurt School philosophers – [a] positions Marx *against* party line Marxism and "doctrines," and [b], argues for a new political doctrine.