

## The Search for Method (1st part). Introduction to Critique of Dialectical Reason.

Jean-Paul Sartre 1960

# I. Marxism & Existentialism

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**Written:** 1960;

**Source:** Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre;

**Translator:** Hazel Barnes;

**Publisher:** Vintage Books;

**Transcribed:** [Andy Blunden](#);

**Proofed:** and corrected by Gustav Nortje.

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PHILOSOPHY appears to some people as a homogeneous milieu: there thoughts are born and die, there systems are built, and there, in turn, they collapse. Others take *Philosophy* for a specific attitude which we can freely adopt at will. Still others see it as a determined segment of culture. In our view *Philosophy* does not exist. In whatever form we consider it, this shadow of science, this Gray Eminence of humanity, is only a hypostatised abstraction. Actually, there are *philosophies*. Or rather-for you would never at the same time find more than one living philosophy-under certain well-defined circumstances a philosophy is developed for the purpose of giving expression to the general movement of the society. So long as a philosophy is alive, it serves as a cultural milieu for its contemporaries. This disconcerting object presents itself *at the same time* under profoundly distinct aspects, the unification of which it is continually effecting.

A philosophy is first of all a particular way in which the arising class becomes conscious of itself. This consciousness may be clear or confused, indirect or direct. At the time of the *noblesse de robe* and of mercantile capitalism, a bourgeoisie of lawyers, merchants, and bankers gained a certain self-awareness through Cartesianism; a century and half later, in the primitive stage of industrialisation, a

bourgeoisie of manufacturers, engineers, and scientists dimly discovered itself in the image of universal man which Kantianism offered to it.

But if it is to be truly philosophical, this mirror must be presented as the totalisation of contemporary Knowledge. The philosopher effects the unification of everything that is known, following certain guiding schemata which express the attitudes and techniques of the rising class regarding its own period and the world. Later, when the details of this Knowledge have been, one by one, challenged and destroyed by the advance of learning, the over-all concept will still remain as an undifferentiated content. These achievements of knowing, after having been first bound together by principles, will in turn-crushed and almost undecipherable-bind together the principles. Reduced to its simplest expression, the philosophical object will remain in "the objective mind" in the form of a regulative Idea, pointing to an infinite task. Thus, in France one speaks of "the Kantian Idea" or in Germany of "Fichte's *Weltanschauung*." This is because a philosophy, when it is at the height of its power, is never presented as something inert, as the passive, already terminated unity of Knowledge. Born from the movement of society, it is itself a movement and acts upon the future. This concrete totalisation is at the same time the abstract project of pursuing the unification up to its final limits. In this sense philosophy is characterised as a method of investigation and explication. The confidence which it has in itself and in its future development merely reproduces the certitudes of the class which supports it. Every philosophy is practical, even the one which at first appears to be the most contemplative. Its method is a social and political weapon. The analytical, critical rationalism of the great Cartesians has survived them; born from conflict, it looked back to clarify the conflict. At the time when the bourgeoisie sought to undermine the institutions of the Ancien Regime, it attacked the outworn significations which tried to justify them.' Later it gave service to liberalism, and it provided a doctrine for procedures that attempted to realize the "atomisation" of the Proletariat.

Thus a philosophy remains efficacious so long as the praxis ' which has engendered it, which supports it, and which is clarified by it, is still alive. But it is transformed, it loses its uniqueness, it is stripped of its original, dated content to the extent that it gradually impregnates the masses so as to become in and through them a collective

instrument of emancipation. In this way Cartesianism, in the eighteenth century, appears under two indissoluble and complementary aspects. On the one hand, as the Idea of reason, as an analytical method, it inspires Holbach, Helvetius, Diderot, even Rousseau; it is Cartesianism which we find at the source of antireligious pamphlets as well as of mechanistic materialism. On the other hand, it passes into anonymity and conditions the attitudes of the Third Estate. In each case universal, analytical Reason vanishes and reappears in the form of "spontaneity." This means that the immediate response of the oppressed to oppression will be critical. The abstract revolt precedes the French Revolution and armed insurrection by some years. But the directed violence of weapons will overthrow privileges which have already been dissolved in Reason. Things go so far that the philosophical mind crosses the boundaries of the bourgeoisie and infiltrates the ranks of the populace. This is the moment at which the French bourgeoisie claims that it is a universal class; the infiltrations of its philosophy will permit it to mask the struggles which are beginning to split the Third Estate and will allow it to find a language and common gestures for all revolutionary classes.

If philosophy is to be simultaneously a totalisation of knowledge, a method, a regulative Idea, an offensive weapon, and a community of language, if this "vision of the world" is also an instrument which ferments rotten societies, if this particular conception of a man or of a group of men becomes the culture and sometimes the nature of a whole class-then it is very clear that the periods of philosophical creation are rare. Between the seventeenth century and the twentieth, I see three such periods, which I would designate by the names of the men who dominated them: there is the "moment" of Descartes and Locke, that of Kant and Hegel, finally that of Marx. These three philosophies become, each in its turn, the humus of every particular thought and the horizon of all culture; there is no going beyond them so long as man has not gone beyond the historical moment which they express. I have often remarked on the fact that an "anti-Marxist" argument is only the apparent rejuvenation of a pre-Marxist idea. A so-called "going beyond" Marxism will be at worst only a return to pre-Marxism; at best, only the rediscovery of a thought already contained in the philosophy which one believes he has gone beyond. As for "revisionism," this is either a truism or an absurdity. There is no need to readapt a living philosophy to the

course of the world; it adapts itself by means of thousands of new efforts, thousands of particular pursuits, for the philosophy is one with the movement of society. Despite their good intentions, those very people who believe themselves to be the most faithful spokesmen for their predecessors transform the thoughts which they want simply to repeat; methods are modified because they are applied to new objects. If this movement on the part of the philosophy no longer exists, one of two things is true: either the philosophy is dead or it is going through a "crisis." In the first case there is no question of revising, but of razing a rotten building; in the second case the "philosophical crisis" is the particular expression of a social crisis, and its immobility is conditioned by the contradictions which split the society. A so-called "revision," performed by "experts," would be, therefore, only an idealist mystification without real significance. It is the very movement of History, the struggle of men on all planes and on all levels of human activity, which will set free captive thought and permit it to attain its full development.

Those intellectuals who come after the great flowering and who undertake to set the systems in order to use the new methods to conquer territory not yet fully explored, those who provide practical applications for the theory and employ it as a tool to destroy and to construct – they should not be called philosophers. They cultivate the domain, they take an inventory, they erect certain structures there, they may even bring about certain internal changes; but they still get their nourishment from the living thought of the great dead. They are borne along by the crowd on the march, and it is the crowd which constitutes their cultural milieu and their future, which determines the field of their investigations, and even of their "creation." These *relative* men I propose to call "ideologists." And since I am to speak of existentialism, let it be understood that I take it to be an "ideology." It is a parasitical system living on the margin of Knowledge, which at first it opposed but into which today it seeks to be integrated. If we are to understand its present ambitions and its function we must go back to the time of Kierkegaard.

The most ample philosophical totalisation is Hegelianism. Here Knowledge is raised to its most eminent dignity. It is not limited to viewing Being from the outside; it incorporates Being and dissolves it in itself. Mind objectifies itself, alienates itself,

and recovers itself – without ceasing – it realises itself through its own history. Man externalises himself, he loses himself in things; but every alienation is surmounted by the absolute Knowledge of the philosopher. Thus those cleavages, those contradictions which cause our unhappiness are moments which are posited in order that they may be surpassed. We are not only *knowers*; in the triumph of intellectual self-consciousness, we appear as the *known*. Knowledge pierces us through and through; it situates us before dissolving us. We are integrated alive in the supreme totalisation. Thus the pure, lived aspect of a tragic experience, a suffering unto death, is absorbed by the system as a relatively abstract determination which must be mediated, as a passage toward the Absolute. the only genuine concrete.

Compared with Hegel, Kierkegaard scarcely seems to count. He is certainly not a philosopher; moreover, he himself refused this title. In fact, he is a Christian who is not willing to let himself be enclosed in the system and who, against Hegel's "intellectualism," asserts unrelentingly the irreducibility and the specificity of what is lived. There is no doubt, as Jean Wahl has remarked, that a Hegelian would have assimilated this romantic and obstinate consciousness to the "unhappy consciousness," a moment which had already been surpassed and known in its essential characteristics. But it is precisely this objective knowledge which Kierkegaard challenges. For him the surpassing of the unhappy consciousness remains purely verbal. The *existing* man cannot be assimilated by a system of ideas. Whatever one may say or think about suffering, it escapes knowledge to the extent that it is suffered in itself, for itself, and to the degree that knowledge remains powerless to transform it. "The philosopher constructs a palace of ideas and lives in a hovel." Of course, it is religion which Kierkegaard wants to defend. Hegel was not willing for Christianity to be "surpassed," but for this very reason he made it the highest moment of human existence. Kierkegaard, on the contrary, insists on the transcendence of the Divine; between man and God he puts an infinite distance. The existence of the Omnipotent cannot be the object of an objective knowledge; it becomes the aim of a subjective faith. And this faith, in turn, with its strength and its spontaneous affirmation, will never be reduced to a moment which can be surpassed and classified, to a knowing. Thus Kierkegaard is led to champion the cause of pure,

unique subjectivity against the objective universality of essence, the narrow, passionate intransigence of the immediate life against the tranquil mediation of all reality, faith, which stubbornly asserts itself, against scientific evidence – *despite* the scandal. He looks everywhere for weapons to aid him in escaping from the terrible “mediation”; he discovers within himself oppositions, indecisions, equivocations which cannot be surpassed: paradoxes, ambiguities, discontinuities, dilemmas, etc. In all these inward conflicts, Hegel would doubtless see only contradictions in formation or in process of development-but this is exactly what Kierkegaard reproaches him for: even before becoming aware of them, the philosopher of Jena would have decided to consider them truncated ideas. In fact, the *subjective* life, just insofar as it is lived, can never be made the object of a knowledge. On principle it escapes knowing, and the relation of the believer to transcendence can only be conceived of in the form of a *going beyond*. This inwardness, which in its narrowness and its infinite depth claims to affirm itself against all philosophy, this subjectivity rediscovered beyond language as the personal adventure of each man in the face of others and of God – this is what Kierkegaard called *existence*.

We see that Kierkegaard is inseparable from Hegel, and that this vehement negation of every system can arise only within a cultural field entirely dominated by Hegelianism. The Dane feels himself hemmed in by concepts, by History, he fights for his life; it is the reaction of Christian romanticism against the rationalist humanisation of faith. It would be too easy to reject this work as simply subjectivism; what we ought rather to point out, in placing it back within the framework of its period, is that Kierkegaard has as much right on his side as Hegel has on his. Hegel is right: unlike the Danish ideologist, who obstinately fixed his stand on poor, frozen paradoxes ultimately referring to an empty subjectivity, the philosopher of Jena aims through his concepts at the veritable concrete; for him, mediation is always presented as an enrichment. Kierkegaard is right: grief, need, passion, the pain of men, are brute realities which can be neither surpassed nor changed by knowledge. To be sure, Kierkegaard's religious subjectivism can with good reason be taken as the very peak of idealism; but in relation to Hegel, he marks a progress toward realism, since he insists above all on the *primacy* of the specifically real over thought, that the real

cannot be reduced to thought. There are today some psychologists and psychiatrists who consider certain evolutions of our inward life to be the result of a work which it performs upon itself. In this sense Kierkegaardian *existence* is the *work* of our inner life-resistances overcome and perpetually reborn, efforts perpetually renewed, despairs surmounted, provisional failures and precarious victories-and this work is directly opposed to intellectual knowing. Kierkegaard was perhaps the first to point out, against Hegel and thanks to him, the incommensurability of the real and knowledge. This incommensurability maybe the origin of a conservative irrationalism; it is even one of the ways in which we may understand this ideologist's writings. But it can be seen also as the death of absolute idealism; ideas do not change men. Knowing the cause of a passion is not enough to overcome it; one must live it, one must oppose other passions to it, one must combat it tenaciously, in short one must "work oneself over."

It is striking that Marxism addresses the same reproach to Hegel though from quite another point of view. For Marx, indeed, Hegel has confused objectification, the simple externalisation of man in the universe, ' with the alienation which turns his externalisation back against man. Taken by itself-Marx emphasises this again and again-objectification would be an opening out; it would allow man, who produces and reproduces his life without ceasing and who transforms himself by changing nature, to "contemplate himself in a world which he has created." No dialectical sleight of hand can make alienation come out of it; this is why what is involved here is not a mere play of concepts but real History. "In the social production of their existence, men enter into relations which are determined, necessary, independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a given stage of development of their material productive forces. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the real foundation upon which a legal and political superstructure arises and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond."

Now, in the present phase of our history, productive forces have entered into conflict with relations of production. Creative work is alienated; man does not recognise himself in his own product, and his exhausting labor appears to him as a hostile force. Since alienation comes about as the result of this conflict, it is a historical reality and

completely irreducible to an idea. If men are to free themselves from it, and if their work is to become the pure objectification of themselves, it is not enough that “consciousness think itself”; there must be *material* work and revolutionary *praxis*. When Marx writes: “Just as we do not judge an individual by his own idea of himself, so we cannot judge a ... period of revolutionary upheaval by its own selfconsciousness,” he is indicating the priority of action (work and social praxis) over *knowledge* as well as their heterogeneity. He too asserts that the human fact is irreducible to knowing, that it must be *lived* and *produced*; but he is not going to confuse it with the empty subjectivity of a puritanical and mystified petite bourgeoisie. He makes of it the immediate theme of the philosophical totalisation, and it is the concrete man whom he puts at the center of his research, that man who is defined simultaneously by his needs, by the material conditions of his existence, and by the nature of his work—that is, by his struggle against things and against men.

Thus Marx, rather than Kierkegaard or Hegel, is right, since he asserts with Kierkegaard the specificity of human *existence* and, along with Hegel, takes the concrete man in his objective reality. Under these circumstances, it would seem natural if existentialism, this idealist protest against idealism, had lost all usefulness and had not survived the decline of Hegelianism.

In fact, existentialism suffered an eclipse. In the general struggle which bourgeois thought leads against Marxist dialectic, it gets its support from the post-Kantians, from Kant himself, and from Descartes; it never thinks of addressing itself to Kierkegaard. The Dane will reappear at the beginning of the twentieth century when people will take it into their heads to fight against Marxism by opposing to it pluralisms, ambiguities, paradoxes; that is, his revival dates back to the moment when for the first time bourgeois thought was reduced to being on the defensive. Between the two World Wars the appearance of a German existentialism certainly corresponds – at least in the work of Jaspers – to a surreptitious wish to resuscitate the transcendent. Already – as Jean Wahl has pointed out – one could wonder if Kierkegaard did not lure his readers into the depths of subjectivity for the sole purpose of making them discover there the unhappiness of man without God. This

trap would be quite in keeping with the “great solitary” who denied communication between human beings and who saw no way to influence his fellow man except by “indirect action.”

Jaspers himself put his cards on the table. He has done nothing except to comment upon his master; his originality consists especially in putting certain themes into relief and in hiding others. The transcendent, for example, appears at first to be absent from his thought, which in fact is haunted by it. We are taught to catch a presentiment of the transcendent in our failures; it is their profound meaning. This idea is already found in Kierkegaard, but it is less emphasised since this Christian thinks and lives within the compass of a revealed religion. Jaspers, mute on Revelation, leads us back – through discontinuity, pluralism, and impotence – to the pure, formal subjectivity which is discovered and which discovers transcendence through its defeats. Success, indeed, as an *objectification*, would enable the person to inscribe himself in things and finally would compel him to surpass himself. The meditation on failure is perfectly suited to a bourgeoisie which is partially deChristianised but which regrets its past faith because it has lost confidence in its rationalist, positivist ideology. Kierkegaard already considered that every victory is suspect because it turns man away from himself. Kafka took up this Christian theme again in his *Journal*. And one can find a certain truth in the idea, since in a world of alienation the individual conqueror does not recognise himself in his victory and becomes its slave. But what is important to Jaspers is to derive from all this a subjective pessimism, which ultimately emerges as a theological optimism that dares not speak its name. The transcendent, indeed, remains veiled; it is attested only by its absence. One will never go beyond pessimism; one will have a presentiment of reconciliation while remaining at the level of an insurmountable contradiction and a total cleavage. This condemnation of dialectic is aimed no longer at Hegel, but at Marx. It is no longer the refusal of *Knowledge*, but the refusal of *praxis*. Kierkegaard was unwilling to play the role of a concept in the Hegelian system; Jaspers refuses to cooperate *as an individual* with the history which Marxists are making. Kierkegaard realised some progress over Hegel by affirming the *reality* of the lived; Jaspers regresses in the historical movement, for he flees from the real movement of *praxis* and takes refuge in an

abstract subjectivity, whose sole aim is to achieve a certain inward *quality*. This ideology of withdrawal expressed quite well only yesterday the attitude of a certain Germany fixed on its two defeats and that of a certain -European bourgeoisie which wants to justify its privileges by an aristocracy of the soul, to find refuge from its objectivity in an exquisite subjectivity, and to let itself be fascinated by an ineffable present so as not to see its future. Philosophically this soft, devious thought is only a survival; it holds no great interest. But it is one more existentialism which has developed at the margin of Marxism and not against it. It is Marx with whom we claim kinship, and Marx of whom I wish to speak now.

By its *actual* presence, a philosophy transforms the structures of Knowledge, stimulates ideas; even when it defines the practical perspectives of an exploited class, it polarises the culture of the ruling classes and changes it. Marx wrote that the ideas of the dominant class are the dominant ideas. He is *absolutely* right. In 1925, when I was twenty years old, there was no chair of Marxism at the University, and Communist students were very careful not to appeal to Marxism or even to mention it in their examinations; had they done so, they would have failed. The horror of dialectic was such that Hegel himself was unknown to us. Of course, they allowed us to read Marx; they even advised us to read him; one had to know him “in order to refute him.” But without the Hegelian tradition, without Marxist teachers, without any planned program of study, without the instruments of thought, our generation, like the preceding ones and like that which followed, was wholly ignorant of historical materialism. On the other hand, they taught us Aristotelian and mathematical logic in great detail. It was at about this time that I read *Capital* and *German Ideology*. I found everything perfectly clear, and I really understood absolutely nothing. To understand is to change, to go beyond oneself. This reading did not change me. By contrast, what did begin to change me was the *reality* of Marxism, the heavy presence on my horizon of the masses of workers, an enormous, sombre body which *lived* Marxism, which *practiced* it, and which at a distance exercised an irresistible attraction on petit bourgeois intellectuals. When we read this philosophy in books, it enjoyed no privilege in our eyes. A priest, who has just written a voluminous and very interesting work on Marx, calmly states in the opening

pages: “It is possible to study [his] thought just as securely as one studies that of any other philosopher or any other sociologist.” That was exactly what we believed. So long as this thought appeared to us through written words, we remained “objective.” We said to ourselves: “Here are the conceptions of a German intellectual who lived in London in the middle of the last century.” But when it was presented as a real determination of the Proletariat and as the profound meaning of its acts – for itself and in itself – then Marxism attracted us irresistibly without our knowing it, and it put all our acquired culture out of shape. I repeat, it was not the idea which unsettled us; nor was it the condition of the worker, which we knew abstractly but which we had not experienced. No, it was the two joined together. It was – as we would have said then in our idealist jargon even as we were breaking with idealism – the Proletariat as the incarnation and vehicle of an idea. And I believe that we must here complete Marx's statement: When the rising class becomes conscious of itself, this selfconsciousness acts at a distance upon intellectuals and makes the ideas in their heads disintegrate. We rejected the official idealism in the name of “the tragic sense of life.” This Proletariat, far off, invisible, inaccessible, but conscious and acting, furnished the proof – obscurely for most of us – that not all conflicts had been resolved. We had been brought up in bourgeois humanism, and this optimistic humanism was shattered when we vaguely perceived around our town the immense crowd of “sub-men conscious of their subhumanity.” But we sensed this shattering in a way that was still idealist and individualist.

At about that time, the writers whom we loved explained to us that existence is a *scandal*. What interested us, however, was real men with their labours and their troubles. We cried out for a philosophy which would account for everything, and we did not perceive that it existed already and that it was precisely this philosophy which provoked in us this demand. At that time one book enjoyed a great success among us – Jean Wahl's *Toward the Concrete*. Yet we were disappointed by this “toward.” The total concrete was what we wanted to leave behind us; the absolute concrete was what we wanted to achieve. Still the work pleased us, for it embarrassed idealism by discovering in the universe paradoxes, ambiguities, conflicts, still unresolved. We learned to turn pluralism (that concept of the Right) against the optimistic, monistic

idealism of our professors – in the name of a Leftist thought which was still ignorant of itself. Enthusiastically we adopted all those doctrines which divided men into watertight groups. “Petit bourgeois” democrats. we rejected racism, but we liked to think that “primitive mentality,” the universe of the child and the madman, remained entirely impenetrable to us. Under the influence of war and the Russian Revolution, we offered violence – only theoretically, of course – in opposition to the sweet dreams of our professors. It was a wretched violence (insults, brawls, suicides, murders, irreparable catastrophes) which risked leading us to fascism; but in our eyes it had the advantage of highlighting the contradictions of reality. Thus Marxism as “a philosophy which had become the world” wrenched us away from the defunct culture of a bourgeoisie which was barely subsisting on its past. We plunged blindly down the dangerous path of a pluralist realism concerned with man and things in their “concrete” existence. Yet we remained within the compass of “dominating ideas.” Although we wanted to know man in his real life, we did not as yet have the idea of considering him first a worker who produces the conditions of his life. For a long time we confused the *total* and the *individual*. Pluralism, which had served us so well against M. Brunschvieg's idealism, prevented us from understanding the dialectical totalisation. It pleased us to decry essences and artificially isolated types rather than to reconstitute the synthetic movement of a truth that had “become.” Political events led us to employ the schema of the “class struggle” as a sort of grid, more convenient than veridical; but it took the whole bloody history of this half century to make us grasp the reality of the class struggle and to situate us in a split society. It was the war which shattered the worn structures of our thought – War, Occupation, Resistance, the years which followed. We wanted to fight at the side of the working class; we finally understood that the concrete is history and dialectical action. We had repudiated pluralist realism only to have found it again among the fascists, and we discovered the world.

Why then has “existentialism” preserved its autonomy? Why has it not simply dissolved in Marxism?

Lukács believed that he had answered this question in a small book called *Existentialism and Marxism*. According to him, bourgeois intellectuals have been

forced “to abandon the method of idealism while safeguarding its results and its foundations; hence the historical necessity of a 'third path' (between materialism and idealism) in actuality and in the bourgeois consciousness during the imperialistic period.” I shall show later the havoc which this wish to conceptualise *a priori* has wrought at the center of Marxism. Here let us simply observe that Lukács fails absolutely to account for the principal fact: we were convinced at one and the same time that historical materialism furnished the only valid interpretation of history and that existentialism remained the only concrete approach to reality. I do not pretend to deny the contradictions in this attitude. I simply assert that Lukács does not even suspect it. Many intellectuals, many students, have lived and still live with the tension of this double demand. How does this come about? It is due to a circumstance which Lukács knew perfectly well but which he could not at that time even mention: Marxism, after drawing us to it as the moon draws the tides, after transforming all our ideas, after liquidating the categories of our bourgeois thought, abruptly left us stranded. It did not satisfy our need to understand. In the particular situation in which we were placed, it no longer had anything new to teach us, because it had come to a stop.

Marxism stopped. Precisely because this philosophy I want to change the world, because its aim is “philosophy-becoming-the-world,” because it is and wants to be *practical*, there arose within it a veritable schism which rejected theory on one side and *praxis* on the other. From the moment the U.S.S.R., encircled and alone, undertook its gigantic effort at industrialisation, Marxism found itself unable to bear the shock of these new struggles, the practical necessities and the mistakes which are always inseparable from them. At this period of withdrawal (for the U.S.S.R.) and of ebb tide (for the revolutionary proletariats), the ideology itself was subordinated to a double need: security (that is, unity) and the construction of socialism *inside* the U.S. S.R. Concrete thought must be born from *praxis* and must turn back upon it in order to clarify it, not by chance and without rules, but-as in all sciences and all techniques-in conformity with principles. Now the Party leaders, bent on pushing the integration of the group to the limit, feared that the free process of truth, with all the discussions and all the conflicts which it involves, would break the unity of combat; they reserved

for themselves the right to define the line and to interpret the event. In addition, out of fear that the experience might not provide its own clarities, that it might put into question certain of their guiding ideas and might contribute to “weakening the ideological struggle,” they put the doctrine out of reach. The separation of theory and practice resulted in transforming the latter into an empiricism without principles; the former into a pure, fixed knowledge. On the other hand, the economic planning imposed by a bureaucracy unwilling to recognise its mistakes became thereby a violence done to reality. And since the future production of a nation was determined in offices, often outside its own territory, this violence had as its counterpart an absolute idealism. Men and things had to yield to ideas – *a priori*; experience, when it did not verify the predictions, could only be wrong. Budapest's subway was real in Rakosi's head. If Budapest's subsoil did not allow him to construct the subway, this was because the subsoil was counter-revolutionary. Marxism, as a philosophical interpretation of man and of history, necessarily had to reflect the preconceptions of the planned economy.

This fixed image of idealism and of violence did idealistic violence to facts. For years the Marxist intellectual believed that he served his party by violating experience, by overlooking embarrassing details, by grossly simplifying the data, and above all, by conceptualising the event *before* having studied it. And I do not mean to speak only of Communists, but of all the others – fellow travellers, Trotskyites, and Trotsky sympathisers – for they have been *created* by their sympathy for the Communist Party or by their opposition to it. On November 4, 1956, at the time of the second Soviet intervention in Hungary, each group already had its mind made up before it possessed any information on the situation. It had decided in advance whether it was witnessing an act of aggression on the part of the Russian bureaucracy against the democracy of Workers' Committees, with a revolt of the masses against the bureaucratic system, or with a counter-revolutionary attempt which Soviet moderation had known how to check. Later there was news, a great deal of news; but I have not heard it said that even one Marxist changed his opinion.

Among the interpretations which I have just mentioned, there is one which shows the method in all its nakedness, that which reduces the facts in Hungary to a “Soviet act

of aggression against the democracy of Workers' Committees. It is obvious that the Workers' Committees are a democratic institution; one can even maintain that they bear within them the future of the socialist society. But this does not alter the fact that they did not exist in Hungary at the time of the first Soviet intervention; and their appearance during the Insurrection was much too brief and too troubled for us to be able to speak of an organised democracy. No matter. There were Workers' Committees, Soviet intervention took place. Starting from there, Marxist idealism proceeds to two simultaneous operations: conceptualisation and passage to the limit. They push the empirical notion to the perfection of the type, the germ to its total development. At the same time they reject the equivocal givens of experience; these could only lead one astray. We will find ourselves then in the presence of a typical contradiction between two Platonic ideas: on the one side, the wavering policy of the U.S.S.R. gave way to the rigorous and predictable action of that entity, "the Soviet Bureaucracy"; on the other side, the Workers' Committees disappeared before that other entity, "the direct Democracy." I shall call these two objects "general particularities"; they are made to pass for particular, historical realities when we ought not to see in them anything more than the purely formal unity of abstract, universal relations. The process of making them into fetishes will be complete when each one is endowed with real powers: the Democracy of Workers' Committees holds within itself the absolute negation of the Bureaucracy, which reacts by crushing its adversary.

Now there can be no doubt that the fruitfulness of living Marxism stemmed in part from its way of approaching experience. Marx was convinced that facts are never isolated appearances, that if they come into being together, it is always within the higher unity of a whole, that they are bound to each other by internal relations, and that the presence of one profoundly modifies the nature of the other. Consequently, Marx approached the study of the revolution of February 1848 or Louis Napoleon Bonaparte's *coup d'état* with a synthetic intent; he saw in these events totalities produced and at the same time split apart by their internal contradiction. Of course, the physicist's hypothesis, before it has been confirmed by experimentation, is also an interpretation of experience; it rejects empiricism simply because it is mute. But the

constitutive schema of this hypothesis is universalising, not totalising. It determines a relation, a function, and not a concrete totality. The Marxist approaches the historical process with universalising and totalising schemata. Naturally the totalisation was not made by chance. The theory had determined the choice of perspective and the order of the conditioning factors; it studied each particular process within the framework of a general system in evolution. But in no case, in Marx's own work, does this putting in perspective claim to prevent or to render useless the appreciation of the process as a *unique* totality. When, for example, he studies the brief and tragic history of the Republic of 1848, he does not limit himself – as would be done today – to stating that the republican petite bourgeoisie betrayed its ally, the Proletariat. On the contrary, he tries to account for this tragedy in its detail and in the aggregate. If he subordinates anecdotal facts to the totality (of a movement, of an attitude), he also seeks to discover the totality by means of the facts. In other words, he gives to each event, in addition to its particular signification, the role of being revealing. Since the ruling principle of the inquiry is the search for the synthetic ensemble, each fact, once established, is questioned and interpreted as part of a whole. It is on the basis of the *fact*, through the study of its lacks and its “oversignifications,” that one determines, by virtue of a hypothesis, the totality at the heart of which the fact will recover its truth. Thus living Marxism is heuristic; its principles and its prior knowledge appear as regulative in relation to its concrete research. In the work of Marx we never find entities. Totalities, (e.g., “the petite bourgeoisie” of the *18th Brumaire*) are living; they furnish their own definitions within the framework of the research. Otherwise we could not understand the importance which Marxists attach (even today) to “the analysis” of a situation. It goes without saying that this analysis is not enough and that it is but the first moment in an effort at synthetic reconstruction. But it is apparent also that the analysis is indispensable to the later reconstruction of the total structures.

Marxist voluntarism, which likes to speak of analysis, has reduced this operation to a simple ceremony. There is no longer any question of studying facts within the general perspective of Marxism so as to enrich our understanding and to clarify action. Analysis consists solely in getting rid of detail, in forcing the signification of certain events, in denaturing facts or even in inventing a nature for them in order to discover

it later underneath them, as their substance, as unchangeable, fetishised “synthetic notions.” The open concepts of Marxism have closed in. They are no longer *keys*, interpretive schemata; they are posited for themselves as an already totalised knowledge. To use Kantian terms, Marxism makes out of these particularised, fetishised types, constitutive concepts of experience. The real content of these typical concepts is always *past Knowledge*; but today's Marxist makes of it an eternal knowledge. His sole concern, at the moment of analysis, will be to “place” these entities. The more he is convinced that they represent truth a priori, the less fussy he will be about proof. The Kerstein Amendment, the appeals of Radio Free Europe, rumours—these are sufficient for the French Communists to “place” the entity “world imperialism” at the origin of the events in Hungary. The totalising investigation has given way to a Scholasticism of the totality. The heuristic principle – “to search for the whole in its parts” – has become the terrorist practice of “liquidating the particularity.” It is not by chance that Lukács – Lukács who so often violates history – has found in 1956 the best definition of this frozen Marxism. Twenty years of practice give him all the authority necessary to call this pseudo-philosophy a *voluntarist idealism*.

Today social and historical experience falls outside of Knowledge. Bourgeois concepts just manage to revive and quickly break down; those which survive lack any foundation. The real attainments of American Sociology cannot hide its theoretic uncertainty. Psychoanalysis, after a spectacular beginning, has stood still. It knows a great many details, but it lacks any firm foundation. Marxism possesses theoretical bases, it embraces all human activity; but it no longer *knows* anything. Its concepts are *dictates*; its goal is no longer to increase what it knows but to be itself constituted a priori as an absolute Knowledge. In view of this twofold ignorance, existentialism has been able to return and to maintain itself because it reaffirmed the reality of men as Kierkegaard asserted his own reality against Hegel. However, the Dane rejected the Hegelian conception of man and of the real. Existentialism and Marxism, on the contrary, aim at the same object; but Marxism has reabsorbed man into the idea, and existentialism seeks him everywhere *where he is*, at his work, in his home, in the street. We certainly do not claim—as Kierkegaard did – that this real man is

unknowable. We say only that he is not known. If for the time being he escapes Knowledge, it is because the only concepts at our disposal for understanding him are borrowed either from the idealism of the Right or from the idealism of the Left. We are careful not to confuse these two idealisms: the former merits its name by the *content* of its concepts, and the latter by the *use* which today it makes of its concepts. It is true also that among the masses Marxist *practice* does not reflect, or only slightly reflects, the sclerosis of its theory. But it is precisely the conflict between revolutionary action and the Scholastic justification of this action which prevents Communist man – in socialist countries as in bourgeois countries – from achieving any clear self-consciousness. One of the most striking characteristics of our time is the fact that history is made without self-awareness. No doubt someone will say this has always been the case; and this was true up until the second half of the last century- that is, until Marx. But what has made the force and richness of Marxism is the fact that it has been the most radical attempt to clarify the historical process in its totality. For the last twenty years, on the contrary, its shadow has obscured history; this is because it has ceased to live *with history* and because it attempts, through a bureaucratic conservatism, to reduce change to identity.

Yet we must be clear about all this. This sclerosis does not correspond to a normal aging. It is produced by a world-wide combination of circumstances of a particular type. Far from being exhausted Marxism is still very young, almost in its infancy; it has scarcely begun to develop. It remains, therefore, the philosophy of our time. We cannot go beyond it because we have not gone beyond the circumstances which engendered it. Our thoughts, whatever they may be, can be formed only upon this humus; they must be contained within the framework which it furnishes for them or be lost in the void or retrogress. Existentialism, like Marxism, addresses itself to experience in order to discover there concrete syntheses; it can conceive of these syntheses only within a moving, dialectical totalisation which is nothing else but history or- from the strictly cultural point of view which we have adopted here-“philosophy-becoming-the world.” For us, truth is something which becomes, it *has* and *will have* become. It is a totalisation which is forever being totalised. Particular facts do not signify anything; they are neither true nor false so long as they

are not related, through the mediation of various partial totalities, to the totalisation process.

Let us go further. We agree with Garaudy when he writes (*Humanité*, May 17, 1955): “Marxism forms today the system of coordinates which alone permits it to situate and to define a thought in any domain whatsoever—from political economy to physics, from history to ethics.” And we should agree all the more readily if he had extended his statement (but this was not his subject) to the actions of individuals and masses, to specific works, to modes of life, to labor, to feelings, to the particular evolution of an institution or a character. To go further, we are also in full agreement with Engels when he wrote in that letter which furnished Plekhanov the occasion for a famous attack against Bernstein: “There does not exist, as one would like to imagine now and then, simply for convenience, any effect produced automatically by the economic situation. On the contrary, it is men themselves who make their history, but within a given environment which conditions them and on the basis of real, prior conditions among which economic conditions – no matter how much influenced they may be by other political and ideological conditions – are nevertheless, in the final analysis, the determining conditions, constituting from one end to the other the guiding thread which alone puts us in a position to understand.” It is already evident that we do not conceive of economic conditions as the simple, static structure of an unchangeable society; it is the contradictions within them which form the driving force of history. It is amusing that Lukács, in the work which I have already quoted, believed he was distinguishing himself from us by recalling that Marxist definition of materialism: “the primacy of existence over consciousness” – whereas existentialism, as its name sufficiently indicates, makes of this primacy the object of its fundamental affirmation.

To be still more explicit, we support unreservedly that formulation in *Capital* by which Marx means to define his “materialism”: “The mode of production of material life generally dominates the development of social, political, and intellectual life.” We cannot conceive of this conditioning in any form except that of a dialectical movement (contradictions, surpassing, totalisations). M. Rubel criticises me for not making any allusion to this “Marxist materialism” in the article I wrote in 1946, “Materialism and Revolution.” But he himself supplies the reason for this omission.

“It is true that this author is directing his comments at Engels rather than at Marx.”

Yes, and even more at contemporary French Marxists. But Marx's statement seems to me to point to a factual evidence which we cannot go beyond so long as the transformations of social relations and technical progress have not freed man from the yoke of scarcity. We are all acquainted with the passage in which Marx alludes to that far-off time: “This reign of freedom does not begin in fact until the time when the work imposed by necessity and external finality shall cease; it is found, therefore, beyond the sphere of material production proper” (*Capital*, III, p. 873). As soon as there will exist *for everyone* a margin of *real* freedom beyond the production of life, Marxism will have lived out its span; a philosophy of freedom will take its place. But we have no means, no intellectual instrument, no concrete experience which . allow, us to conceive of this freedom or of this philosophy.

### footnote

The *methodological* principle which holds that certitude begins with reflection in no way contradicts the *anthropological* principle which defines the concrete person by his materiality. For us, reflection is not reduced to the simple immanence of idealist subjectivism, it is a point of departure only if it throws us back immediately among things and men, in the world. The only theory of knowledge which can be valid today is one which is founded on that truth of microphysics: the experimenter is a part of the experimental system. This is the only position which allows us to get rid of all idealist illusion, the only one which shows the real man in the midst of the real world. But this realism necessarily implies a reflective point of departure; that is, the *revelation* of a situation is effected in and through the *praxis* which changes it. We do not hold that this first act of becoming conscious of the situation is the originating source of an action; we see in it a necessary moment of the action itself—the action, *in the course of its accomplishment*, provides its own clarification. That does not prevent this clarification from appearing in and by means of the attainment of awareness on the part of the agents; and this in turn necessarily implies that one must develop a theory of consciousness. Yet the theory of knowledge continues – to be the weak point of Marxism. When Marx writes: “The materialist conception of the world

signifies simply the conception of nature as it is without any foreign addition,” he makes himself into an *objective observation* and claims to contemplate nature as it is absolutely. Having stripped away all subjectivity and having assimilated himself into pure objective truth he walks in a world of objects inhabited by object-men. By contrast, when Lenin speaks of our consciousness, he writes: “Consciousness is only the reflection of being, at best an approximately accurate reflection”; and by a single stroke he removes from himself the right to write what he is writing. In both cases it is a matter of suppressing subjectivity: with Marx, we are placed beyond it; with Lenin, on this side of it.

These two positions contradict each other. How can the “approximately accurate reflection” become the source of *materialistic rationalism*? The game is played on two levels: there is in Marxism a constituting consciousness which asserts *a priori* the rationality of the world (and which, consequently, falls into idealism); this constituting consciousness determines the constituted consciousness of particular men as a simple reflection (which ends up in a sceptical idealism). Both of these conceptions amount to breaking man's real relation with history, since in the first, knowing is pure theory, a non-situated observing, and in the second, it is a simple passivity. In the latter there is no longer any experimenting, there is only a sceptical empiricism; man vanishes and Hume's challenge is not taken up. In the former the experimenter transcends the experimental system. And let no one try to tie one to the other by a “dialectical theory of the reflection” the two concepts are essentially *anti-dialectical*. When knowing is made apodictic, and when it is constituted against all possible questioning without ever defining its scope or its rights, then it is cut off from the world and becomes a formal system. When it is reduced to a pure psycho-physiological determination, it loses its primary quality, which is its relation to the object, in order to become itself a pure object of knowing. No mediation can link Marxism as a declaration of principles and apodictic truths to psycho-physiological reflection (or dialectic). These two conceptions of knowing (dogmatism and the knowing-dyad) are both of them *pre-Marxist*. In the movement of Marxist “analyses” and especially in the process of totalisation, just as in Marx's remarks on the *practical* aspect of truth and on the general relations of theory and *praxis* it would be easy to

discover the rudiments of a *realistic* epistemology ;which has never been developed. But what we can and ought to construct on the basis of these scattered observations is a theory which *situates* knowing *in the world* (as the theory of the reflection attempts awkwardly to do) and which determines it in its negativity (that negativity which Stalinist dogmatism pushes to the absolute and which it transforms into a negation). Only then will it be understood that knowing is not a knowing of ideas but a practical knowing of *things*; then it will be possible to suppress the *reflection* as a useless and misleading intermediary. Then we will be able to account for the thought which is lost and alienated in the course of action so that it may be rediscovered by and in the action itself. But what are we to call this situated negativity, as a moment of praxis and as a pure relation to things themselves, if not exactly “consciousness”?

There are two ways to fall into idealism: The one consists of dissolving the real in subjectivity; the other in denying all real subjectivity in the interests of objectivity. The truth is that subjectivity is neither everything nor nothing; it represents a moment in the objective process (that in which externality is internalised), and this moment is perpetually eliminated only to be perpetually reborn. Now, each of these ephemeral moments- which rise up in the course of human history and which are never either the first or the last-is lived as a *point of departure* by the subject of history. “Class-consciousness” is not the simple lived contradiction which objectively characterises the class considered, it is that contradiction already surpassed by praxis and thereby preserved and denied all at once. But it is precisely this revealing negativity, this distance within immediate proximity, which simultaneously constitutes what existentialism calls “consciousness *of the object*” and “non-thetic self-consciousness.”

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