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Existential Marxism in Postwar France

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From Sartre to Althusser

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For My Father

Preface

My purpose in this study has been to trace the relationship of Marxism and existentialism as the dominant theme in recent French social thought. My thesis is that the two doctrines converged in Sartre and in the *Arguments* group, establishing the beginnings of a social theory of the New Left. Starting from the period right after World War II, when Marxism and existentialism were competing doctrines, I have described the movement of Sartre and his circle toward Marxism and the movement of Marxists away from Stalinism. By the mid-1960s there had been various attempts at a synthetic existential Marxism, all of which should be seen as tentative beginnings that might result in a major new social theory. In the final chapter, I test the new theory by using it to help us comprehend the events of May–June, 1968. Existential Marxism emerges as a social theory suited to comprehend the conditions and the contradictions of advanced industrial society, to articulate the situation of various groups in this society, and to provide a new kind of theory for the human sciences that sees the scientist not as value-free or objective but as implicated in the object of his knowledge. Existential Marxism might thus be considered both as the "ideology" of an emerging radical coalition and as a theoretical advance in its own right.

My disciplinary orientation is that of the history of ideas which describes changing intellectual patterns with more concern for the relation of ideas to society than for the

logical consistency of the ideas themselves. Hence I have not attempted a systematic exposition of New Left social theory, but have restricted myself, with minor exceptions, to articulating the theories of the French. It will be clear to the reader that I am sympathetic to the effort of the existential Marxists, although I am not committed to any particular version of their thinking. I adhere to their commitment to a radical restructuring of relations and institutions in advanced industrial society, and I am especially convinced of the value of their efforts to redefine the nature of the human sciences. My study of their positions has challenged me to consider the limitations of intellectual history, but I have not deviated very far, in this work, from its traditional methodological boundaries. Finally, it is my hope that the study of the theoretical advances of the French will be of value to all those concerned about the present state of social theory in the human sciences and to all those in the United States who are beginning to confront their situation on a theoretical level.

I have been able to profit from the work of other scholars of recent French social theory. H. S. Hughes, *The Obstructed Path* (1968) covers the period from 1930 to 1960, ranging over the entire landscape of social thought. Walter Odajnyk, *Marxism and Existentialism* (1965) analyzes philosophically the relations of Stalinist Marxism and Sartre's early positions. George Lichtheim, *Marxism in Modern France* (1966) illuminates Marxism at the level of political theory. Arnold Metzger, *Existentialismus und Sozialismus: der Dialog des Zeitalters* (1968) interrogates the two doctrines by looking at the German traditions of Martin Heidegger and *Lebensphilosophie*. Raymond Aron, *Marxism and the Existentialists* (1969) treats the French scene, and I have dealt with his views as part of my narrative. It should be stated that my study treats the convergence of Marxism and existentialism as both possible and necessary, whereas previous accounts have been either suspicious or hostile. Hence this study attempts to revise

the current image of this period of French social theory from one of an obstructed path to one that accounts for openings into new directions. Instead of characterizing the period through the impasses and dead ends of Camus, Teilhard de Chardin, and others, as does Hughes, we will see that it was a period of profound reorientation and vitality in social theory.

For purposes of a provisional statement to help the reader orient himself as he proceeds, existential Marxism may be defined very loosely as follows: a non-Leninist Marxism that conceptualizes advanced industrial society in a way that points toward the possible elimination of its alienating structures; that looks to all the relations of daily life, not simply to relations of production, to make society intelligible; that picks up from existentialism the effort to capture human beings in the moment of their active creation of their world, in their subjectivity; and, finally, that rejects the attempt to have a closed theory complete within itself.

A fellowship from the University of California made it possible for me to visit Paris and speak with many French theorists. I want to note my thanks for their kind help and for their putting up with my French, such as it is. I spoke with the following people: Kostas Axelos, Jean Baudrillard, Bernard Besnier, Michel-Antoine Burnier, Cornélius Castoriadis, Michel Contat, Dominique Desanti, Jean-Marie Domenach, Joseph Gabel, Richard Gombin, André Gorz, Claude Lefort, Edgar Morin, Stanley Pullberg, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet. I want to mention also the colleagues and friends who argued with me about this study, who read parts of the manuscript and who gave me their criticisms and suggestions: Robert Anchor, Paul Breines, David Carroll, Peter Clecak, Jack Diggins, Alexander Gelley, Martin Jay, Frederic Jameson, James Miller, David Schalk, Jeremy Shapiro, Ricky Sherover, Shierry Weber, and Hayden White. In particular I want to thank Dick Howard for the enormous help he has freely given to me in working over

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I

Neither Idealism Nor Materialism

One

The Hegel Renaissance: Toward a Philosophical Anthropology

1. Hegel in France

The sudden prominence of Hegel among French intellectuals after World War II signified a break with traditions of thought. French intellectuals had paid little attention to Hegel when he dominated German thought in the 1830s and 1840s. Even a thinker like Auguste Comte, with his grand vision of the total development of mankind that in many ways paralleled Hegel's, remained ignorant of his counterpart to the east.[1] The utter absence of interest in Hegel by academic philosophers as well as by intellectuals was reported as late as 1931 by Alexandre Koyré, a historian of philosophy and of science. Unlike Germany, England, and Italy, France had no Hegelian schools, not one recognized disciple of Hegel, and of course few serious students of Hegel in French universities.[2] Only "offbeat" intellectuals like André Breton's surrealists and a circle of

[1] Frank Manuel, *Prophets of Paris* (N.Y., 1965) 287.

[2] Alexandre Koyré, "Rapports sur l'état des études hégéliennes en France," *Revue d'histoire de la philosophie,* 5:2 (April–June, 1931) 147. This judgment of the lack of the teaching of Hegel in French universities until 1940 is also stated by Mikel Dufrenne, the important phenomenologist, in "Actualité de Hegel," *Esprit,* 16:148 (Sept., 1948) 396. The exception that confirms the rule would be Lucien Herr, who taught Hegel at the Ecole Normale as far back as the pre-1914 period. Cf. Jean Duvignaud, "France: the Neo-Marxists," in L. Labedz, ed., *Revisionism: Essays on the History of Marxist Ideas* (N.Y., 1962) 314; and that H. Lefebvre and N. Gutermann had published selected translations in 1939 as *Morceaux choisis de Hegel* (Paris, 1939).

young Marxists in the 1920s paid tribute to the German dialectician. Among the reasons suggested by Koyré for the lack of interest in Hegel were the obscurity of Hegel's writing, the strength of Cartesian and Kantian philosophical traditions, Hegel's Protestantism, but, above all, the incredulity of the French toward Hegel's "strict identity of logical synthesis and historical becoming." [3] On the contrary for French rationalists, history was separate from reason or logic, which was eternal, outside time. If this was the situation, how can we account for the abrupt turn to Hegel in the 1940s?

In the eyes of many converts to Hegel, the catastrophic defeat of France in 1940 had discredited liberal-bourgeois intellectual and political traditions, leaving the nation in a conceptual vacuum. The only moral force left in France, on the eve of the Liberation, came from the Resistance movement, which had been dominated by politically progressive groups. In the estimate of Henri Lefebvre, "after the Liberation, there was no longer . . . bourgeois thought calling itself such." [4] The experience of the war and the Resistance "transformed the basic givens of intellectual life in France: the themes of reflection, the problems, concepts, and attitudes." [5] After 1944, there was a longing for basic renewal, social, political, and intellectual. With a combined socialist and Communist vote reaching a majority, intellectuals harbored the dream of imminent and radical social transformation. During the hopeful but finally disillusioning post-war years, the "decisive philosophical event" was the discovery of the Hegelian dialectic.[6] There were thus direct links between the collapse of the old bourgeois world, the expectations of socialism, and the emergence of interest in Hegel.

[3] Koyré, *op. cit.*, 150. The quotation is from Léon Brunschvicg, *Le Progrès de la conscience dans la philosophie occidentale* (Paris, 1927) Vol. 1, 397.

[4] Henri Lefebvre, "Le Marxisme et la pensée française," *Les Temps Modernes*, 13:137–138 (July–Aug., 1957) 110–111.

[5] *Ibid.*, 106.

[6] *Ibid.*, 114.

The rebirth of interest in Hegel was directed primarily at *The Phenomenology of Spirit* [7] and to a somewhat lesser degree at Hegel's early essays. Intellectuals of most traditions—Catholics, Marxists, existentialists, phenomenologists and academic philosophers—read and debated Hegel, immersing themselves in a system of thought that was foreign to established assumptions. The assimilation of the *Phenomenology* was particularly the point of departure for the confrontation of Marxism and existentialism. The reading of Hegel, it was felt, could dissolve the long-standing conflict between idealists and materialists and could initiate a totally fresh direction of investigation. The study of the introduction of Hegel into France forms a prologue to the eventual formation of a new intellectual synthesis. The task of bringing the *Phenomenology* to a broad audience, of demonstrating the power and insight of this book, fell to two men: Alexandre Kojève, a Russian emigré, and Jean Hyppolite. By themselves, these two philosophers translated Hegel, lectured on Hegel, and published lengthy commentaries on the *Phenomenology,* bringing to light and confronting the public with a new way of thinking and of seeing the world. Many important developments in French thought since then derived, directly or indirectly, from the unsettling and reshuffling of French consciousness inspired by the Hegel renaissance. The study of the *Phenomenology* by Kojève and Hyppolite was an intellectual source for the renewal of Marxism, for Sartre's existentialism, and perhaps even for the structuralism of the 1960s.[8]

The profound effect of the *Phenomenology* resounded in varied tones in the diverse corners of French intellectual life. Yet everyone agreed that Hegel, although himself an idealist, provided a means of criticizing certain aspects of

[7] Henri Niel, "L'Interpretation de Hegel," *Critique,* 18 (Nov., 1947) 427.

[8] Cf. The structuralist, Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self,* trans. A. Wilden (Baltimore, 1968) 192–196, 218–219, 306, 308. These references are to Wilden's discussion of the influence of Kojève's study of Hegel on Lacan.

idealism. The idealist tendency to make concepts atemporal was the chief defect for which the French found an antidote in Hegel. The *Phenomenology*'s emphasis on the historicity of reason and conversely the rationality of history was the source of its relevance. Now Catholics could escape Thomism, Marxists oppose Stalinism, and existentialists combat neo-Kantianism. The arid forms of rationalism in academic philosophy appeared feeble compared with Hegel's philosophy of alienation in history, his dialectic, his phenomenology of consciousness. Perhaps Hegel held the key to unlock the riddles of the dualisms of subject and object, of what is and what ought to be, of history and ontology, of the individual and society, of science and humanism, of knowledge and action. Such, for example, was the sanguine attitude of Merleau-Ponty: "All the great philosophical ideas of the past century had their beginnings in Hegel: the philosophies of Marx and Nietzsche, phenomenology, German existentialism, and psychoanalysis; it was he who started the attempt to explore the irrational and integrate it into an expanded reason which remains the task of our century." [9]

Hegel's *Phenomenology* was also used to combat the recent conservatism of European social thought in the first three decades of the century. The scientific study of society seemed to demonstrate that it was *in the nature of things* that democracy was an unattainable ideal, that social order required elites, coercive organizations, and irrational ideologies. Social theory in the hands of Durkheim, Pareto, Weber, and Michels had uncovered irrationalities in modern society that tended to dim all hopes for radical democratization.[10] Pareto drew attention to the force of irrational emo-

[9] *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston, Ill., 1964) 63. Throughout this study, translations are my own, except where the title is given in English. Also, all emphases are in the original, except where otherwise indicated.

[10] H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought: 1890–1930* (N.Y., 1958).