

## Elizabeth Butterfield: *Sartre and Posthumanist Humanism*

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Elizabeth Butterfield's book *Sartre and Posthumanist Humanism*<sup>1</sup> was published in English by a German publishing house already in 2012. It went largely unnoticed although it deals with a crucial aspect of politics and the modern state of the last thirty years in the age of postmodern society: social identities. When Jean-Paul Sartre wrote his *Critique of dialectical reason* (1960) at the end of the 1950s, society—at least the European society—still was a class society, a society based on the two main classes of bourgeoisie and proletariat with several intermediary classes. The major change associated with the cultural revolution of the generation of 68 was the replacement of the class society by a society mainly based on social identities. For now more than thirty years, politics is identity politics to an important part.

Postmodern human beings have several social identities. Some of them may still be based on classes—or maybe we should better talk of socioeconomic strata—, others are based on gender, on ethnicity, on religion, on sexual orientation etc. These later social identities became very much the focus in political discussions, whether we talk about gender issues, black lives matter, gay marriage or Islam. Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were the godparents of modern discussions about social identities. No other book influenced modern feminism more than Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). Sartre dealt with social identities in early works such as *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946) and *Black Orpheus* (1948). Already in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), he discussed the question of the coming out of gays.

As Sartre wrote in his *Critique*, these social identities are series. In series, the individual shares a common relationship to what Sartre calls the practico-inert (Butterfield: *Sartre and Posthumanist Humanism*, p. 114), the external environment created by human beings. In contrast to humans beings in groups, human beings in series are isolated from each other (p. 101). There are series that come into existence incidentally, such as a group of people queuing at a bus stop, and there are series that describe a social totality. What differentiates social identities from other

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Butterfield: *Sartre and Posthumanist Humanism*. Peter Lang: Frankfurt, 2012, 140 pp.

series such as the series of TV viewers is that—like in case of the classes—social identities influence our attitudes, value, language, the way we feel, think, act, dress, talk, and move (p. 103). Each human has several social identities. E.g. somebody may be a woman, urbanite, heterosexual, with kids, white, agnostic, manager in a financial institution.

Since such social identities are independent of each other, intersectionality—a term we find very early in Butterfield's book (p. 19)—is the norm. All humans are constituted by multiple, intersecting, and diverse identities (p. 99). As we know from Sartre's, Philippe Gavi's, and Pierre Victor's book *It is Right to Rebel*, Sartre was one of the early persons favoring the concept of multiple social identities. Sartre and Gavi opposed Victor's idea that the questions of women and gays were just side contradictions and not main contradictions in our society. For them, the issue of women's and gay rights was to be considered on the same level as the question of economic exploitation.

This diversity is connected to perspectivalism. Claims depend on the observer's standpoint (p. 14). According to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, it is the subject that defines his values and needs in his fundamental choice/project. Sartre's perspectivalism went even one step further, since it does not only refer to values, but is also an epistemological one. What the world, the in-itself, means to consciousness, depends on the observer's standpoint. A rock is not to everybody the same rock. In a world of Trump and fake news, this is not a trivial insight.

The prime target of Butterfield's book *Sartre and Posthumanist Humanism* is to understand the phenomenon of social identities. In this endeavor, Butterfield refers not only to Sartre, but also to other related theories, particularly in chapter five of her book. She mentions the feminist philosophers Iris Young, Patricia Hill Collins, Chandra Mohanty, Linda Alcoff, the critical race theorists Kimberle Crenshaw, Lucius Outlaw, David Goldberg, the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and many others. Butterfield tries to bring these different perspectives together in a general theory on social identities by using Sartre's later philosophy.

Sartre's key concept, which Butterfield uses for the understanding of the nature of social identities, is the Objective Spirit. Social identities are part of the Objective Spirit. Butterfield devotes the entire chapter two of her book to the analysis of Sartre's term of the Objective Spirit. According to Sartre, the Objective Spirit is culture as the practico-inert (p. 50). "Objective Spirit is the collective context of meaning in which all past praxis is recorded and transmitted from generation to generation throughout history. [...] Objective Spirit provides the child with the tools

for understanding both self and world, passing along identities, value systems, and ideologies" (p. 131). Sartre refers to the Objective Spirit already in the *Critique* as a "medium for the circulation of significations" (p. 49). Prominently it is used in *The Family Idiot*, Sartre's comprehensive biography of Gustave Flaubert.

Any philosopher who talks about the Objective Spirit will first think of Hegel. However, as Butterfield correctly shows, Sartre's notion of the Objective Spirit, which includes philosophy, art, and religion attributed by Hegel to the Absolute Spirit, is much more influenced by Wilhelm Dilthey (p. 48f.). With the Objective Spirit, there is a second field of close proximity between Dilthey and Sartre.<sup>2</sup>

Butterfield is also right when she describes Sartre's Objective Spirit as a unity within multiplicity (p. 59f.). Differently from Hegel and Dilthey, his notion of Objective Spirit should not be understood as a monolithic whole that expresses the *Zeitgeist* of a culture, but can refer as well to elements of a society, e.g. to different families (p. 61). There is not one French mentality, but many.

As to the question of the coming into existence of the Objective Spirit and the social identities, Butterfield especially recurs to Sartre's concepts of praxis and practico-inert. They form the core of the first chapter of Butterfield's book. Social identities are created by the praxis of human beings. Praxis itself rests on scarcity and needs and by that is embedded in materiality (p. 29-32). Man has to act because scarcity requires action by man to satisfy his needs. Butterfield correctly shows that Sartre's later philosophy finally rests on the notion of needs. These are the individual needs that drive the human being to act.

Chapter three of her book is devoted by Butterfield to the question of the relationship between the individual and the social in the process of the formation of the subject. As Sartre showed in *The Family Idiot* this is a process of internalization and externalization, of constitution and personalization (p. 63). Already in *Search for a Method*, Sartre had explored this process in detail. We are what we make of what is made of us. First, there is the process of the constitution of man in which he internalizes the external. A part of the internalized is the Objective Spirit. Childhood and family (p. 69) play a very important role in this internalization of the Objective Spirit, as Sartre himself had shown in his biographies about Baudelaire, Genet, and Flaubert. This first step of

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<sup>2</sup> The other field of close proximity between the two are the concepts of understanding and explaining. When I mentioned this at a conference of Jaspers and Sartre scholars in France a few years ago, it caused quite some amazement. When specialists talk about Sartre's predecessors, Dilthey is rarely mentioned.

constitution is followed by the second step of personalization, the re-externalization of the internal. Constitution and personalization form together the dialectic process of the creation of what Sartre termed the “singular universal”, the subject. According to Sartre, needs are therefore at the same time objective and historically conditioned (by the process of constitution) as well as singular and contingent, i.e. chosen by the subject (by the process of personalization) (p. 35). Butterfield exemplifies this dialectics by referring to Sartre’s favorite example of Flaubert, but also to the artist and architect Maya Lin.

In this context, I would have appreciated if Butterfield had additionally referred to Sartre’s various forms of groups, from the simple group and the pledged group to the organized group and finally the institutions. The Objective Spirit is passed on to other people mainly through groups and institutions. The family is not the only important group with regard to the Objective Spirit. Religious and political groups—just to mention two—play an important role in defining and passing on social identities.

Additionally, I am missing Sartre’s concept of the milieu. In his criticism of the Marxist concept of classes as a revolutionary force, Sartre maintained that series are mainly passive and only organized groups are active in society and politics. However, according to Sartre, series can become active by forming milieus. And indeed, when talking about social identities, milieus play a very crucial point. There are the milieus of women, black, gays, ethnical groups. Even religious groups, although frequently organized in churches, mosques and synagogues, normally operate in milieus. Milieus put infrastructure, practical-inert at the disposal of their members, partly in a localized form. Women’s magazines, black music, gay bars, Halal shops are important for the understanding of the respective social identities. In their positive aspect—Butterfield emphasizes that social identities are not exclusively sources of oppression, but can also play positive roles (p. 127)—, social identities are very much expressed in and by their relative milieus.

Chapter four of Butterfield’s book is entitled “Problems and Possibilities of Human Relationships”. Here Butterfield describes Sartre’s early recognition of the importance of social relations. Differently from the common sociophobic understanding of “Hell are other people”, *No Exit* primarily demonstrates the basic human need for the Other. However, at the time of *Being and Nothingness* and *No Exit*, Sartre saw these relationships primarily in the form of conflict and not *Mitsein* (p. 84). Working at the *Notebook for an Ethics* and later at the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre turns, according to Butterfield, to a more positive appreciation of social relations, to themes like mutual recognition, cooperative group praxis, and even authentic love (p. 81).

In my opinion, Butterfield paints an overly optimistic picture of Sartre's second philosophy—and this not only in ch. 4. That Sartre's subject is doomed to fail is valid for the human being in the *Critique*, too. The difference between *Being and Nothingness* and the *Critique* is that failure in *Being and Nothingness* is rooted in the conflict between human consciousnesses, whereas in the *Critique* failure is due to the limits of the practico-inert with its scarcity, its counter-finalities and exigencies/ external constraints. There is not only praxis—praxis approximately corresponds to Max Weber's instrumentally rational and value-rational actions—, there is also hexis—traditional actions in Weber's terms—and particularly there are processes. Process is a term Sartre borrowed from Karl Jaspers and is by definition something beyond human control.

These praxes, hexes, and processes are a part of systems to which human beings belong. A society consists of several systems. Systems that dominated society in Sartre's time were the capitalist, the racist and connected with it the (neo-)colonialist system—Sartre first prominently used the concept of system in his essay *Colonialism is a System* of 1956—, the technician-bureaucratic, and the patriarchal systems. Systems necessarily alienate human beings. By their very nature, systems are so complex that responsibilities become blurred. Someone cannot only be both, oppressed and oppressor, as Butterfield cites Johnetta Cole (p. 108), but oppressors are oppressed at the same time, as Sartre wrote in the preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.

The whole process of the formation of social groups reflects Sartre's pessimistic worldview. Only the original group—largely unorganized like a group of soccer players who have incidentally met to have fun together—is seen by Sartre in a positive way. Already on the next level of the pledged group there is authority and power and the group may become a terror-fraternity. On the third level there is the organized group, which frequently turns into an institutionalized group/institutions where the individuals are re-serialized again.

Butterfield's too optimistic approach appears also when she writes about needs. Her differentiation between false needs and true fundamental needs is not tenable in a true Sartrean system. In a truly Sartrean system, there are no objective values. It is rather nihilistic. Each human being is free to choose his/her own values and therefore his/her needs. The differentiation between alienating and non-alienating social systems (p. 36) does not help. Unless we move towards an anarchistic vision of society, any social system will be alienating. Butterfield herself writes: alienation rises from scarcity and Sartre thinks that there is no chance that scarcity can be overcome completely (p. 37).

Regardless these shortcomings, with her book *Sartre and Posthumanist Humanism*, Elizabeth Butterfield proves that she is not just another Sartrist, who just cites Sartre, but does not understand his philosophy. She is rather a true Sartrean philosopher. She presents Sartre's philosophy in a systemic way rarely seen—and this is particularly true with regard to Sartre's later philosophy. She shows that Sartre's late philosophy of the time around the *Critique* and the *Flaubert* has the potential to think beyond the traditional dichotomies of individual vs. social, freedom vs. necessity, and essence vs. anti-essence. With this philosophy, Sartre indeed found a way to think the individual and the social together, a philosophy that can form a basis for a new posthumanist humanism (p. 132).

Why Butterfield called this philosophy Marxist-existentialist remains her secret. There is not much Marxism in this philosophy: no determinism, no classes as the main actors of history, no base that determines the superstructure, no utopian view on the overcoming of scarcity. The simple use of the notions of proletariat and bourgeoisie cannot justify calling Sartre's philosophy a Marxist-existentialist one. The only explanation I can see lies in an act of friendship to her mentor Thomas Flynn, who with his book *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism* (1984) was one of the most prominent interpreters of Sartre's later philosophy. Sartre was rather an anarchist than a Marxist philosopher.

Nov. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018