

Iron in his soul

Jean-Paul Sartre, who is due to stand trial later this month on charges of libelling the police, explains his current political standpoint to John Gerassi

Jean-Paul Sartre has a knack for making news. Long considered France's greatest intellectual, who has influenced two generations of writers all over the world, Sartre has also contributed to the developing social consciousness of the post-Second World War era through his determined, if at times erratic political commitment. Until the 1956 Russian invasion of Hungary his political activity was closely allied to that of the French Communist Party: he participated in most of the period's anti-war and anti-American demonstrations, and was a regular contributor to the Communist-sponsored Peace Congresses. After 1956, when he openly denounced the Russian invasion, Sartre's position was no less vehement but much more independent.

He played an important role in the French anti-Vietnam war movement, and was so active during the Algerian war that French right-wing extremists tried to kill him various times. Sartre also wrote, spoke and demonstrated against the regime of Charles de Gaulle, and led numerous protests against the US Vietnam war. In 1966 and 1967 he was president of the International War Crimes Tribunal, which condemned the U.S. for genocide in Vietnam.

For all his political acumen, however, Sartre was caught by surprise by the events of May, 1968, when French students launched a disorganised rebellion against de Gaulle which almost led to his overthrow. Sartre reacted by justifying youth's rejection of traditional values, and became what the French call a *gauchiste*, meaning a militant semispontaneous leftist. In effect, Sartre took the position that anything on the far Left goes, hence gave his support to any group that found itself too far afield of French traditional Left-wing politics to benefit from the country's civil liberties policies.

He became a "responsible editor" of various newspapers which the police tried to suppress, chaired "people's courts" wherever the Left attempted to focus attention on what it considered official injustice, and lent his name to any new organisation whose avowed purpose was to stimulate revolution without the participation of the French Communist Party. In June he was finally arrested and indicted for libelling the police and his trial is scheduled to open on September 20.

Living very modestly in a one-room apartment off Montparnasse, Sartre collects no possessions save books, and gives away most of his sizeable income to needy Left-wing writers or to the struggling *gauchiste* press. He insists that the committed intellectual must never use his status for special privileges and he claims that the only relevant writing possible today is the political tract.

Yet he himself has just finished a 2,000-page work on Flaubert, and though he used that great nineteenth-century novelist as a tool to dissect France's bourgeoisie, the two-volume opus is certainly in contradiction with his stated position. Sartre also made news recently for his open break with Fidel Castro over the case of the Cuban poet Heriberto Padilla, who had been gaoled temporarily for his "counter-revolutionary attitudes." Though valiantly insisting that all genuine revolutions must honour, indeed defend, creative freedom, Sartre's position on Padilla actually reaffirmed what he had tried to deny, namely that intellectuals have a privileged status.

JG: In a few days, part one of your massive work on Flaubert will be published. Yet you have often told me in recent times that the only viable activity for the intellectual today is the political race. Is that not a contradiction? And would you explain what you mean by viable activity?

JPS: My book on Flaubert may, indeed, be a form of petty bourgeois escapism vis-à-vis the exigencies of the times, though it is a very political work. What I mean is simply that the status of the intellectual has changed. He must now write with the masses, in liaison with them. He must put his technical knowledge at their disposal. In other words his privileged status is over. Today it is a sheer bad faith, hence counter-revolutionary, for the intellectual to dwell on his own problems, instead of realising that he is an intellectual because of the masses and through them, therefore, that he owes his knowledge to them and must be with them and in them; he must be dedicated to work for their problems, not his own.

In my case, as you know, I have put myself on the line in various actions. For example, I worked for the people's tribunal in Lens (where rebellious workers were charged with various crimes),

put my skill at the service of the people's prosecution, explained in tracts why it was the bosses and directors of the Renin-Lietard firm who were the true criminals, wrote out the judgment, etc.

I wrote this material, but I was only the mouthpiece of the miners. Also I write articles for revolutionary newspapers, such as "J'Accuse", even though I may not be in total accord with the paper's ideology. I've lent my name to any revolutionary paper that requested it. Why? Well of course, at the beginning it's part of the star-system, letting my name be used to help launch such papers. Simone de Beauvoir, as you know, has done the same. But the objective is to collectivise these papers, to eliminate names altogether, and eventually to create newspapers written by political participants, that is by the masses who fight, the rôle of the editorial collective being only to help technically, put these papers together and publish them. Each time there is a seizure of a plant by workers, for example, our job is to make sure that it is the workers themselves who explain why they did it, what they felt and learned from it.

JG: In what way does this differ fundamentally from the task of the Communist Party which has always had intellectuals but is based on workers?

JPS: The Communist Party has always separated the intellectual from the masses. Its principal mode of operation is the cell, of which there are two kinds – the enterprise cell and the neighbourhood cell. In both cases the intellectual, either because they do not work in the enterprise, the factory, or because they do not live in working class neighbourhoods, are separated from the masses.

JG: There's difference in life style too, isn't there?

JPS: Yes, but, you know, the masses never really hold that against you. I've noticed that in my own case many times. It's that I'm with workers in actions that count, not the fact that I may live differently and better in Paris. No, language is a much more serious problem. Intellectuals take for granted all sorts of propositions which workers do not.

You know it's much easier for a philosopher to explain a new concept to another philosopher than to a child. Why? Because the child, with all his naiveté, asks the real questions. So do workers. To reach them, we have to use a different language, not talk down to them – that always fails – but use a language that is honest, by which I mean we have to use words which are not loaded with a past. We have to demystify our words. If you look at "Rouge" ("Red," the newspaper of the Fourth International in Paris) for example, you will understand what I mean: it's unreadable, full of Marxist concepts each with a past, half words whose meaning is clear only to the initiated. What we want to create is a language that explains the necessary political realities in a way that everyone can understand.

JG: But are such newspapers, no matter how simply written, read by the masses? It doesn't seem to me to be the case for "J'Accuse", and I know it's not the case with Leftist newspapers in England or the US.

JPS: The only solution to that is militant distribution. A committed newspaper must show its commitment not only in its content but in its distribution as well. It is not enough to plunk a pile of papers at the vendor, or wage a subscription campaign. The paper must be distributed in the factories, in the working-class neighbourhoods, in the ghettos – by militants going up to the individual workers. What's more, the militant distributors must not just sell or give away the paper but talk about it, ask the worker what he thinks about it, and why. It is the reader who must ultimately make the paper. Say the paper talks about the seizure of a plant in Grenoble, in articles written by workers who participated in the seizure, well then, the militant distributor asks the worker in front of the Renault plant at Billancourt to read it, comment on the article, write about it (or talk into a tape recorder, which then becomes an article for the next issue). The militant distributor, who is inevitably an intellectual at first, thus operates merely as a sort of mediator between the workers of Grenoble and Billancourt.

JG: That may be possible in France where the workers are politicised, have a class-consciousness, but in the US, where this is not the case, where in fact many unionised workers are against you, would the tactic be appropriate?

JPS: I would say the tactic should be the same, though the risks are different. In the US your distributors may be beaten up more often. But that happens here in France too. Our people are often roughed up, sometimes very, very seriously, by the goon squads of the CGT (General Confederation

of Workers – which is run by the Communist Party). That's why it is my job to do things like that, as there is more of a chance for me to get to talk to workers than a student.

JG: You would say that big name intellectuals in America should do the same?

JPS: Absolutely, it is very easy to denounce the war in Vietnam by signing petitions or marching in a parade with 20,000 comrades. But it doesn't accomplish one millionth what could be accomplished if all your big-name intellectuals went into the ghettos, into the Oakland port, to the war factories, and risked being manhandled by the roughs of the maritime union. In my view, the intellectual who does all his fighting from an office is counter-revolutionary today, no matter what he writes.

JG: Are you ready to risk your own skin in this tactic?

JPS: Yes, and I have – at Renault, in Lens, in Paris streets. Of course, I am fully aware that it is easier for me as my name, my prestige, protects me somewhat, always. But would this not be the case of your big-name intellectuals too? Usually, wherever you go, wherever I appear, there is a group of people for you, a group against, and a majority who are just curious, usually neutral, perhaps amused. It's to them you must talk. Depending on the relationship of these forces, the risk is minimal or great. But let's face it, had they beaten me up, there would have been certain political advantages from that, no?

JG: But a big-name intellectual such as you can have access to the straight press which is read by the masses. Why not then take advantage of that?

JPS: Careful. The masses do not read straight press to be informed but to be entertained. That's why they read "L'Aurore" here and ... what? ... the "Daily News" in New York.

Should they read a Leftist newspaper, they may not agree with it, they may in fact be totally against, but they know the object is to inform, not entertain. The concept of freedom of the press is a bourgeois concept. The masses don't worry about such things, and you will never see workers protesting press censorship, here in France at least, and I would conjecture that neither in the US would masses wage a campaign against the censorship of reports from Vietnam. The masses know instinctively that the press belongs to the bourgeoisie, not to the masses. Freedom of the press is capitalist freedom of the press, which means that, perhaps unconsciously, the masses view the press as the enemy. Hence they don't expect from it anything that is really meaningful in terms of their own lives. This was not true, of course, in Czechoslovakia, where the workers and students were united in demanding a press that would inform them as their own, that is, as a Socialist press.

But in a capitalist country the straight press doesn't really count, so why write for it. As for the independent left-wing weeklies or monthlies, they are not read by the masses, only by the Leftist bourgeoisie. In general, I will write, here in France at least, only for newspapers that are militant, even if I don't always agree with their ideological position, that is, newspapers whose staff understands that their rôle is to break the vicious circle by going to the masses militantly, and that doesn't mean hawking the newspapers in front of the cafés.

JG: Considering the many defeats the movement and you personally have suffered over the last three decades, how do you manage to stay optimistic?

JPS: I do what I believe an intellectual should do today, but that doesn't mean I'm optimistic. I'm in the system and I'm forced to stay in it, but I also feel the revolution must triumph. This is a choice. It is not necessarily evident. And if it does triumph, then what? Will the human condition be cleansed of exploitation, alienation, and all that we find disgusting in this society? I'm not so sure. All I hope is that if we are successful in bringing about a revolution without terror, then we'll be able to face things squarely, that is, look at our oppressive past, all the ideas imposed on us by machines, but which today we consider – falsely – our own, and deal with them together.

JG: A revolution without terror, yes, but is it conceivable? Can we really expect a successful revolution without revanchism? Can we expect the winners to forget the brutality, the viciousness, the tortures of those in power today? Can a George Jackson be expected to forgive his sadistic guards?

JPS: No, but that might not be so bad. It is better that revolutionaries wipe out the guilty than each other. Unfortunately, in the past, the winners have always thought about stopping. Historians claim revolutionaries never know where or when to stop. But it is the contrary. They always do stop, so that the next generation of revolutionaries have felt obliged to go after the previous generation. It

happened four times during the French Revolution of 1789-94. Perhaps it would be better if for once a revolutionary movement was ready and willing to go all the way.

This, of course, means totally juking all the bourgeois values we have been taught in schools, in the press, at home. My feeling is that of all the groups within the Left today, the undogmatic Maoists, which we here call "les Maos", are most prepared to do that, that is they have most understood that to be genuinely successful a revolution must be what bourgeois historians claim is impossible, namely a revolution that is total yet without terror.

JG: Is that why you will not work with the Communist Party anymore? There was a time when you did. And it is still, in France anyway, a mass party.

JPS: During the occupation I did indeed work with the Communists, as did all resists who were genuinely anti-Fascist. After the liberation, the opportunistic manoeuvres of the party made our adherence impossible, and I was often attacked as an enemy in their newspapers. But at the beginning of the 1950s, specifically during the massive US encroachment, NATO etc., and after French Communist leader Jacques Duclos, a deputy, was arrested (totally illegally as he had parliamentary immunity and in fact was far away from the "Ridgeway go home" demonstrations for which he was accused of being the organiser) I decided to side with them.

The Communists were also leading the opposition to the war in Vietnam – ours, then – and I helped publicise the case of Henri Martin, a French Communist sailor who refused to participate in the war and was being tried for treason. So I helped as much as I could. I even went to Vienna for the Peace Congress. Then the USSR invaded Hungary. To me this was monstrous. Up to then, yes, the Soviet Government had perpetuated horrible crimes, what we call Stalinism, but never before had the troops invaded an independent nation to put down a popular internal insurrection.

To me this was imperialism, pure and simple, as was its invasion of Prague in 1968. The French Communist Party supported the invasion of Hungary so I broke with it. Then, during the Algerian war, the CP showed itself very lukewarm in its support of the FLN, primarily because the FLN was not Communist, and so, though at times the whole Left united to stage joint anti-French colonialist demonstrations, it became clear that it was time to create a movement to the Left of the CP. That Left emerged seriously with the Vietnam war – yours – and I was part of it. But I was still a typical intellectual. That is, I did my work at my desk, and occasionally joined a parade in the streets or spoke at some meeting.

Then May, 1968, happened, and I understood that what the young were putting into question was not just capitalism, imperialism, the system etc., but those of us who pretended to be against all that, as well. We can say that from 1940 to 1968 I was a Left-wing intellectual (*un intellectuel de gauche*) and from 1968 on I became a Leftist intellectual (*un intellectuel gauchiste*). The difference is one of action. A Leftist intellectual is one who realises that being an intellectual exempts him from nothing. He forsakes his privileges, or tries to, in actions. It is similar, I think, to what in the US you would call white-skin privileges. A white Leftist intellectual, in America, I presume, understands that because he is white, he has certain privileges which he must smash through direct action. Not to do so is to be guilty of murder of the blacks – just as much as if he actually pulled the triggers that killed, for example, Bobby Rutton, Fred Hampton, Marc Clark, and all the other Black Panthers murdered by the police, by the system.

JG: Are you saying then that the responsibility of the intellectual is not intellectual?

JPS: Yes, it is in action. It is to put his status at the service of the oppressed directly. Just as the German intellectual who fled Hitler and talked about his anti-nazism while he earned money writing scripts for Hollywood, was as responsible for Hitler as the German who closed his eyes, just as the American intellectual who only denounces the Vietnam war and the fate of your political prisoners but continues to teach in a university that carries out war research and insists on law and order (which is a euphemism for letting the courts and police repress active dissenters) is as responsible for the murders and repression as is the Government and its institutions, so too, here in France, the intellectual who does not put his body as well as his mind on the line against the system – and should be judged accordingly.

JG: But concretely, what can committed intellectuals do?

JPS: In America, it is not for me to say. Surely, your intellectuals know that themselves. They must know that if Ericka Euggins and Bobby Seale are gaoled or killed, it is not the police, the courts,

the FBI, and the Government alone that gaols or kills them. They will have let that happen and hence are similarly accountable. Every intellectual who cries non-violence to those who try to free political prisoners – and I understand you have thousands and thousands in America – he is responsible for their not being free. Concretely, I can only talk of France where I am more familiar with the facts. Here, when we have political trials, our job is to immediately stage people's trials, to be in the streets and accuse the real culprits. Here, when the youth confront the police, our job is not only to show that it is the police who are the violent ones, but to join the youth in counter-violence. Here, when political prisoners go on a hunger strike, all of us who can physically do so, must also go on a hunger strike.

What it comes down to is this – and George Jackson expressed this beautifully in his prison letters – that the intellectual, more than anyone else precisely because of his privileged status, must understand, and act accordingly, that there are only two types of people: the innocent and the guilty, or as your Black Panthers have also said: "If we're not part of the solution we're part of the problem."

JG: Do you then openly support the use of revolutionary counter-violence to the violence of the system?

JPS: Absolutely. But obviously, as a man of 65, I cannot participate in it just like that. But whenever there is an important action which is not clandestine I must join it, and in my writing support the clandestine acts as well.

JG: Do you think that these Leftist groups here in France, which, relatively, are minuscule

JPS: Yes, minuscule ...

JG: Who use counter-violence, can bring about the revolution?

JPS: I think that they themselves are the product of a revolutionary situation, not in the sense that there will be a revolution soon, but in the sense that there is a real division today between official France – the State, the Government, the institutions – and the truth. There is a violent refusal of official power. Be it by small shopkeepers, truck-drivers, peasants, students, or workers who seize plants, we have the embryo of a total rejection of power. Of course this is still mostly unconscious, as these very same people, come election time, vote for official France. But they know, by their actions when their self-interest is at stake, that real change can only come about through violence. I feel that only these minuscule groups understand this, that is why they are the vanguard. As long as they keep plugging away, consciousness can only grow and the split in the society will become more apparent. Once the two sides become clear, revolution becomes inevitable.

JG: So you approve of the Weatherman tactics in the US?

JPS: Except that the Maos here are less violent and they are not trying to lay the foundation of a revolutionary party but to create conditions which will mobilise the masses from which, and only from which, such a party will surge. But, you see, the conditions are not the same. Here we often win. The hunger strike was successful. After our people's trial in Lens, the accused miners were freed by their courts. After forcing them to arrest big-named intellectuals, including me, they stopped trying to prohibit "La Cause du Peuple." In the US repressions are vicious. They kill, of course. I think they could win too if big-named intellectuals and personalities became more active. Would they have opened fire at Kent State if every anti-war professor teaching there was in the front lines? Would the police have been so brutal if every one of those so-called liberal anti-war Congressmen and Senators inside the Democratic convention had been outside with the people?

JG: But from a revolutionary point of view, that does not necessarily bring about a movement willing to bring down the system. After all, Algeria didn't create such a Left in France, did it?

JPS: No, and God knows we tried. I think the error is that such a policy is, after all, fundamentally moral. There's nothing wrong with that, on the contrary: to refuse to fight in Vietnam, or Algeria, or Chad etc. is fine and should be encouraged. But a revolutionary policy aims locally: exploitation at home, racialism at home, injustice at home. In a capitalist country, exploitation, racialism, injustice, leads necessarily to wars, but it's secondary as far as establishing a mass-based revolutionary movement is concerned. And that's the real test today, of those intellectuals who pretend to be committed. It's easy for us to denounce the war – and do nothing. It's harder for us to pretend to want a just and humanitarian society and confront the injustices and inhumanities in our own bailiwicks, in the very places we live – and which give us our life of ease. But that's where the action

is. That's where the fight really is. I imagine that every intellectual who claims to be committed and lives in New Haven must have been first of all committed to the freeing of Bobby Seale ...

JG: No. Yale's intellectuals seemed to find too many things to criticise about the Panthers to have been active supporters of Ericka and Bobby.

JPS: Ah. Well, I fear, that's as if I had said that the main resistance against Germany being led by the Communists and my being anti-Communist, I cannot join the resistance. There's only one word for such a position: collaborationist. We have a lot of such collaborationists here in France, too. They never understood May 1968. They refused to understand that the protected status of the intellectual is over, that there are no sanctuaries. The university, the laboratory, the research centre, these are all State institutions and hence just as much part of the system as the CRS (France's anti-riot tactical police Police Force). The task of the intellectual is not to decide where are the battles but to join them wherever and whenever the people wage them.