

Sartre in His Fraternity

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I am neither a Sartrian nor a Sartrologue, nor even an amateur weekend dabbler in Sartre. I have none of the qualities required to talk about the philosopher who saw Relevance as 'the most French of the virtues'. I simply have the leisure time to go back to the fact that, having read Sartre since my student years in Paris, I felt there was in his fiction and thought a general poetics of fraternity. I understood very early on that the newcomer can enjoy in supreme fraternity the strength of the radiance which, in Jean-Paul Sartre's work, leads straight to the universal solidarity of human communities and civilizations.

But those human communities, which Sartre's genius did not hold back from warning or even occasionally scolding though he loved them dearly, did those human communities really comprehend the idea of fraternity as used by the author of *La Nausée*? In the maze of a voluminous bibliography I checked the number of times the enlightenment philosophers' third utopia appears, starting with the title of a study on the thinker or the artist. Not once, from 1945 to 2001. It is as if the sun of fraternity never shone on the Herculean labours of the little man in Paris, who experienced the horrors and marvels of the 20th century till his strength was exhausted, always the legendary hero of culture and freedom.

To assuage my disappointment I turned immediately to the authority of two formers of opinion: Jean Daniel and Bertrand Poirot-Delpech. A short while after Sartre's death on 15 April 1980, one of them in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, the other in *Le Monde*, they put their finger most intelligently on what was as precious and brilliant as diamond in the personality and the philosophical and literary work of Sartre.

According to Poirot-Delpech, Sartre was 'an upright, fraternal man (who) shows us the path to freedom even by its very detours'. As for Jean Daniel, his portrait of Sartre on 21 April 1980 is likely to come up fresh in the 21st century as we go through the vicissitudes and achievements of the globalization forced upon us.

He [Sartre] was there, gigantic, ever present, wide-ranging, untiringly accessible and infinitely hungry: all the curiosity and fraternity in the world fled into that face and body which was movingly ugly and strangely, infectiously strong.

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These words put before us *the fantastic fraternal fact* of a Hercules of knowledge and affection who had a more favourable star than Rimbaud or Van Gogh, Baudelaire or Dostoyevsky.

On my humble level I had the good fortune to observe close to, on three occasions in the 1960s, in Havana, Vienna and Moscow, the luminous shimmer of the being who, at the end of his chief magnum opus *Les Mots*, confessed that, in the absence of the slightest expectation of salvation, he still had the fortune 'to be a complete human, made out of all humans and equal to all of them and equal to anyone'.

It is an 'anyone' from the once colonial south who has the honour this evening of sharing with Unesco's guests the limited experience he has of the books and the considerable figure of Jean-Paul Sartre.

He was once in Moscow in the early summer of 1962. I was then working as a correspondent for *Revolución*, the paper that was the mouthpiece for Fidel Castro's government. Having discovered that Sartre was at the Ukraina Hotel, I at once requested an interview for my paper. My first surprise was that Sartre had not forgotten the obscure poet who, two years earlier, had been among the group of intellectuals accompanying Simone de Beauvoir and himself during their visit to Cuba, from 20 February to 20 March 1960. Sartre even remembered that one evening I was sitting by him at the famous cabaret Tropicana watching a show whose extraordinary erotic charge had thrilled him to tears. 'Let's have breakfast together tomorrow morning, shall we, my friend?' he asked me.

Quite early next morning I saw Sartre coming into the hotel dining-room, merry and sprightly, looking good, fighting fit, all primed to express his views to a Haitian in the guise of 'yet another Cuban'. Of course the first few exchanges in the interview focused on the visit to Cuba. I found Sartre euphoric at discovering a triumphant revolution a few miles away from Uncle Sam's empire. He and Simone de Beauvoir had been astounded by its commanders Fidel Castro and Ernesto Guevara. The faith and energy of those young leaders of the revolution reminded them of Stendhal. The music, which was everywhere in a life that Cubans always seem to live as a dance, the playful and boldly sensual lifestyle specific to their particular personality, in short the whole cultural ecosystem of the island made the famous couple think that at last, for once, revolution and the joyful transformation of history into carnival were taking a lovely fraternal stroll together.

To every hostile decision by Eisenhower's administration, then John Kennedy's, Fidel Castro responded with reactive measures which on each occasion made Cubans' hunger for national independence veer more radically to the left. In the couple's view David's adaptive technique applied to Goliath's manoeuvres had a twofold strategic merit: it speeded up the liberation process at the same time as it hammered out instantly the ideology of the revolution. As far as Sartre and his partner were concerned, Castro's imagination had found the cleverest method of distinguishing itself from marxist, soviet or maoist dogma, which had never been his cup of tea (or coffee) when he was a guerrilla fighter in the Sierra Maestra or taking civic action in the towns, and which had managed to dismantle Batista's dictatorship.

Sartre's virtuoso mind judged Castro's historic initiative entirely capable of 'changing the Cubans' very nature'. The bar of Cuban-style revolution was being set very high. Sartre's enthusiasm caused Bernard-Henry Lévy to say that Cuba was 'an

ideal microcosm where very immediate actions and topics could be tested'. Indeed in Paris Sartre had just published *Critique de la raison dialectique*, his most ambitious philosophical work since *L'Être et le néant*.

In Moscow in 1962, talking through me to Cuban opinion, Sartre was to go further with his enthusiastically optimistic 1960 comments: the revolution was becoming more and more authentic thanks to American stratagems intended to crush it. Sartre described even more flatteringly the '*líder máximo*' who was marking out a made-to-measure ideology for Cuba like a Caribbean Don Quixote, with his olive-green battledress and at his side his Argentine Sancho Panza, whose godfathers would have been Spinoza and Stendhal. As for me, a victim, *mutatis mutandis*, of the same wild lyrical illusions, I could at that moment only applaud the impression of a celebration of 'direct democracy' which the Cuba trip had left in Jean-Paul Sartre's and Simone de Beauvoir's democratically generous imagination.

I was about to say goodbye to Sartre when an appropriately female surprise suddenly changed the writer's schedule, and mine as a result. A Russian 'femme-jardin',² a kind of fascinating biological scandal in the Slav style, came to warn the illustrious guest that she had some shopping to do in Moscow. She would come back around midday to pick him up for the planned lunch in the country at the dacha belonging to Ilya Ehrenburg, the famous soviet writer and journalist.

May I introduce you, said Sartre, to my interpreter Lena Zonina. Despite her first name, which is a Siberian river, if the Kremlin gave her her head Lena would torch in her path all the lies told by Russia and the Christian west.

At these words a shock went through me. Those two had spent the night together.

Many years later, as I was reading Annie Cohen-Solal, I would learn that throughout his life 'there was a kind of law that said that Sartre should have a passionate love affair in every country he visited'.

Once the soviet incarnation of solar eroticism had left the room, Sartre confided in me, with the voracious astonishment that I had seen grip his whole being in Cuba at the sight of the imperious incandescence of the Tropicana's young *danseuses-jardins*. 'How many things there are to love when a woman embodies a whole country!', he said. 'God in seventh heaven', I muttered, astounded by the cosmic extent of what he was telling me. The amorous philosopher went on: 'As I have the morning free, why don't we chat for a while longer, if you can spare the time?'

In the natural spirit of his genius and his intoxication with life Sartre fraternized with this 'anyone' who had landed there from Black Haiti. Without forcing my way in at all I was invited into the paradise of Sartrian knowledge and humour. The glorious 'whole man', who was reputed to be unable to tolerate a male presence for more than two hours, since female company aerated his sensibility and intelligence so much better, honoured me with three hours of marvellously invigorating tête-à-tête. He did not allow me to leave until the tonic return of phenomenology's hair, breasts, curves and captivating big black eyes!

In the desert of meaning that the fraternal legacy of the October revolution's early days had become, despite the obvious difference in level as regards our respective importance in society, Sartre and I made a kind of polyphonic musical thought. The memory of *Orphée noir* came back like a leitmotif, and our melodies touched

sporadically on the common gulfs that fraternity and terror have continued to deepen pitilessly in the history of cultures and civilizations.

Why this painful topic in preference to any other?

The text of *Orphée noir*, one of Sartre's best-known and most controversial, had appeared as a preface to a selection of African, Caribbean and Madagascan poets made by Léopold Sedar Senghor. It was the aesthetic, cultural and moral event of 1948. With the passing of time *Orphée noir* has acquired the eminence of a sacred element of civilization. For the first time in the history of the colonial West a 'white' philosopher, who could be compared to Spinoza or Nietzsche, had dared to break all the taboos of the old anthropology from the colonial period and involve his European academic status viscerally in the historic tragedy of black Africa and black America.

We were a thousand miles from the cautious, ambiguous murmuring of the anthropology departments. Very early on colonialism had repelled Sartre's mind; in his view it was the supreme infamy of his time, despite the elitism which had assisted the Poulou child from the La Rochelle lycée and the best crammers in Paris to set himself up as the brother of the planet's human communities. Sartre, an alumnus of the Ecole Normale, had treated as brothers from a single mother-earth-fatherland the Senghors, Césaires, Damas, Roumains, Nigers, Laleaus, Brierres, Rabemamanjaras and the other poets in the anthology. 'We, people of Europe, are being decolonized, we are having the colonist in each of us torn out in a bloody operation', exclaimed Sartre in a ferment.

Sartre is still being criticized for the radical nature of his fraternization with the black poets of decolonization and their revolt. Public contempt is expressed for his having fraternally identified his violence with the violence of the Césaires, Damas, Roumains and especially Frantz Fanon. It rarely occurs to people that the idea of violence which aspired to decolonize supposed 'whites' and so-called 'blacks' arose perhaps from disappointed, wounded affection or fraternity rather than deadly hatred.

The business is phenomenally complex. In the present state of affairs in the world I wonder whether ending all historical forms of violence is not the Himalayan peak which the honour of the human race will be increasingly required to measure itself against. If only the path of humanization were able to lead us, as Sartre wished, 'to extend the idea of fraternity until it becomes a single, obvious bond between human beings'. Otherwise, with the current situation of the crises in international civil society, history would work itself out to our shame and universal dishonour.

In this regard Jean Daniel, as a follower of Camus, faithful to his nature which was closely connected to Sartre's, has said some extremely apposite things. Once he was confined to bed in hospital. Roger Stéphane brought him Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre*, with a preface by Sartre. In their forthright radicalism the latter's 'torrential talent' and Fanon's explosive hatred of the colonist gave Jean Daniel's weakened organism the aggression of a new golden staphylococcus. That day he nearly broke with Sartre. The bitter experience made him ask these crucial questions:

When do we know that violence really tends to its own abolition? How do we decide on the need for violence to change the direction of history?

Those pointed questions asked in 1980 are more relevant than ever on a world scale.

In 1962, when I met Sartre in Moscow, I had just read *Les Damnés de la terre*. It was tempting to ask the writer of the preface whether it was reasonable to talk about the dual nature of violence in history. A violence that brought about civility in human relations – and which in the end was progressive – and a violence that was just barbarism. In the 2005 context all possible variants of violence appear one after another on our screens, from the atrocious 9/11 massacre via the day-to-day violence of suicide attacks, to the upsurge of torching of cars and nursery schools by juveniles. What relationship is there between fraternity and the various levels of terrorism?

In 1962 Sartre honestly admitted that he had no correct answer to my questions. In March 1980, a month before he died, when he was questioned on the same topic by Benny Lévi in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, he confessed that to tell the truth 'he did not clearly see the connection between violence and fraternity'. In these uncertain circumstances what can Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre do for a 21st century which only the progress of fraternity can save?

A little idea lights up in my head each time I think about Sartre's relations with women. Though he was far from being indifferent to the act of love as such, what seemed to interest him above all was affectionate fraternization with the 'second sex'. He was quite willing and happy to let part of his royalties blow away with the female rose. What he expected of women was not the wild celebration of sexual jousting but rather a romantic atmosphere of sentimentality: a whole complex set in which sensibility, tenderness, reason, intelligence, emotional values and erotic values come together.

With Simone de Beauvoir and to a lesser extent his other partners, Sartre had succeeded in combining with the idea of brotherhood the idea of sisterhood which permeates the mix of his knowledge and affectivity. Since civilizations have always been macho they have never tried to incorporate the sisterly dimension into humanist ideals of liberty, equality, fraternity. As well as the noun, the adjective 'sisterly' (relating to 'sister') has also remained in the background. Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir achieved a synthesis of sisterly and brotherly utopias. The quest for a new enlightenment adventure already incorporates their double beam in order to avoid the never-ending tragedy represented by a solely financial and commercial globalization.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Note

1. Lecture given on 24 November 2005 at Unesco on the occasion of the conference 'What do Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir have to say to us today?' organized in the context of the programme 'Pathways of Thought'. We are grateful to Unesco for permission to reproduce it.
2. A specifically Haitian notion: a favourite who embodies all the sensual beauty of the landscape (translator's note).