

Sovereignty and Deviation Notes on Sartre's Critique of Dialectical Reason, Vol. 2

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Abstract:

This article explores the analysis of Stalinism advanced in the second, unfinished volume of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. It focuses especially on the concepts that Sartre adduces to explain the Revolution's demand for a sovereign individual at its helm, and the deviations associated to the idiosyncrasies of the figure into which a beleaguered praxis came to alienate itself. It argues that Sartre's conception of the historical dialectic is profoundly attuned to the phenomenon and the phenomenology of Stalinism because of the centrality that individual facticity – the necessity of human contingency – has in the French philosopher's thought, ever since *Being and Nothingness*. This leads to a multi-dimensional effort at producing a fundamentally 'biographical' dialectic, which in turn requires the forging of a 'dialectical biography'.

Keywords:

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It was as if a whole nation had suddenly abandoned and destroyed its houses and huts, which, though obsolete and decaying, existed in reality, and moved, lock, stock, and barrel into some illusory buildings, for which not more than a hint of scaffolding had in reality been prepared. ... Imagine that that nation numbered 160 million; and that it was lured, prodded, whipped and shepherded into that surrealistic enterprise by an ordinary, prosaic, fairly sober man, whose mind had suddenly become possessed by that half-real and half-somnabulistic vision, a man who established himself in the role of super-judge and super-architect, in the role of a modern super-Pharaoh. Such, roughly, was now the strange scene of Russian life, full of torment and hope, full of pathos and of the grotesque; and such was Stalin's place in it; only that the things that he drove the people to build were not useless pyramids.

– Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography*

Whereas capitalist society is torn by irreconcilable antagonisms between workers and capitalists and between peasants and landlords – resulting in its internal instability – Soviet society, liberated from the yoke of exploitation, knows no such antagonisms, is free of class conflicts, and presents a picture of friendly collaboration between workers, peasants and intellectuals.

– Joseph Stalin, Speech at the 18th Congress of the CPSU (1939)

The critique of Stalinist reason

What could it mean to think Stalin and Stalinism philosophically? How might such an exercise affect Marxism's self-understanding? Whether systematically, or episodically, several philosophers have sought to produce conceptual analyses of the theory and practice of Stalinism: Hannah Arendt in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Herbert Marcuse in *Soviet Marxism*, Louis Althusser in *Reply to John Lewis*, Alain Badiou in *Of an Obscure Disaster*, Slavoj Žižek in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* Yet none, it could be argued, ever took the phenomenon of Stalinism as the testing ground for philosophical thinking itself. That is instead what Jean-Paul Sartre attempted in the second, unfinished volume of his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, written, and interrupted, in 1958, and finally published in French, under Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre's editorship, in 1985.¹ The discussion of Stalin and Stalinism takes up the bulk of this volume, whose guiding problem is 'the intelligibility of History'.

In Sartre's eyes, Marxism, and the dialectic as a thinking of systemic societal change, requires the unity-in-process of history as a human project: 'Marxism is strictly true if History is totalization'.² And yet, as the first volume of the *Critique* explored in compendious detail, the only reality of human praxis is to be located in the actions of individual organisms, multiple singular 'for-themselves' adrift in a universe of hostile matter. History is not given as a presupposition, and neither is there any 'hyper-organism' (society, the proletariat, humanity itself) that could be thought of as its subject-object. The unity of history must be arduously produced by the actions of human beings against the grain of their atomisation, their 'seriality'. Whence Sartre's painstaking phenomenologies of the unification of individual organisms into groups – above all in the pledged group-in-fusion, catalysed by an 'Apocalypse' and soldered together by 'fraternity-Terror' – and their further reification into collectives.³

The questions posed to Sartre by the editors of the *New Left Review* in 1969 nicely encapsulate this conundrum: 'How can a multiplicity of individual acts give birth to social structures which have their own laws, discontinuous from the acts which for you formally constitute a historical dialectic? . . . Why should history not be an arbitrary chaos of inter-blocking projects, a sort of colossal traffic-jam?'⁴ In Volume 2 of the *Critique* this problem of intelligibility is intimately tied to the question of *struggle*. Without positing an antecedent (and ahistorical) totality, can

1 An excerpt did appear in English during Sartre's lifetime, see Sartre, 1976.

2 Sartre, 1985, p. 25; Sartre 1991, p. 16.

3 In Sartre's second *Critique*, the collective is defined as the 'cancer' of the group. Sartre, 1985, p. 67; Sartre, 1991, p. 58.

4 Sartre, 1969, pp. 58 and 59. Also quoted *New Left Review*, 1976, p. 138.

struggles between individuals or groups be totalised as contradictions, with their own unified meaning? The bravura exposition of the boxing match as a totality enveloping the fighters and 'incarnating' their whole world, and the struggles that shape it – which opens the second tome's proceedings – is aimed at providing a first phenomenological approximation of such an equation between the intelligibility of conflict and the intelligibility of History. It argues that 'each struggle is a singularization of all the circumstances of the social ensemble in movement; and that, by this singularization, it incarnates the totalization-of-envelopment constituted by the historical process'. Though Sartre doesn't adopt that terminology, this is indeed an *expressive* totalization: 'Everything is given in the least punch'.⁵ It also prepares the exploration of a 'boxing match' that would painfully mark the history of twentieth-century Marxist politics, the conflict between Stalin and Trotsky over the direction of the Bolshevik revolution and the genesis of the practical slogan 'Socialism in One Country'. In those passages and throughout, the intelligibility of struggle is also to be understood as the reciprocity of labours that destroy one another in a kind of 'inverted collaboration'. *Anti-labour* provides the dialectical intelligibility of the inefficacies and deformities of struggle, as well as of those objects that stand as struggle's inhuman-all-too-human residua.⁶

It is impossible here to do justice to the dialectical texture and convolutions of Sartre's own writing, or to gauge its historical judgments against the evidence. Notwithstanding Laing and Cooper's impressive pedagogical efforts in their synopsis of its first volume in their *Reason and Violence*, Sartre's *Critique*, not unlike other attempts to invent new styles of dialectical thought and writing (not least its only genuine precursor, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*) repels abridgment. It is possible nonetheless at least to identify the key lines of inquiry – which may also be fault-lines or limits – of Sartre's phenomenology of Stalinism, as well as the conceptual elements it bequeaths to contemporary analysis.

Scarcity and singularity

At the core of Sartre's philosophical engagement with Stalin are two interlinked ideas. The first is that human praxis, especially in its dimensions of conflict and violence, is to be thought of as the internalisation of an external *scarcity*. The latter, as much of the first

5 Sartre, 1985, p. 58; Sartre, 1991, pp. 48-9. Sartre expands on this: 'from the history of the one who delivers it to the material and collective circumstances of that history; from the general indictment of capitalist society to the singular determination of that indictment by the boxing promoters; from the fundamental violence of the oppressed to the singular and alienating objectification of that violence in and through each of the participants'. On the intelligibility of struggle and enveloping totalisation, see also Sartre, 1985, p. 96; Sartre, 1991, p. 85.

6 Sartre, 1985, pp. 105-9; Sartre, 1991, pp. 95-100, on anti-labour.

volume explored, is to be thought of as the contingent but fundamentally conditioning dependency of human life on a material world marked by lack, that is to say by an intrinsic dimension of conflict in which the Other, before becoming a potential co-worker, collaborator or comrade, is above all a rival, a danger, the 'anti-human'. Scarcity is, according to Sartre, a synthetic relation of all men to non-human materiality, and to one another through this materiality, while subjective acts are the re-externalisation of internalised scarcity.⁷ This mediation of the inter-subjective (and indeed the intra-subjective) by the external negativity that characterises materiality itself, and by the very 'worked matter' produced by individuals, collectives, or groups, is a critical feature of Sartre's analysis, one that Stalinism will come to exemplify with disturbing force. As the second volume proceeds, this scarcity will also manifest itself not only as scarcity of material *means*, including in the very literal sense associated with industrialisation, collectivisation and famine, but as a scarcity of *time*, defining the overwhelming *urgency* that determines the Bolshevik effort in its desperate if ultimately 'successful' attempt to thwart the encirclement by bourgeois powers, as well as a scarcity of *knowledge* and a scarcity of *men*.⁸ The latter entails that the problem of leadership is never understandable as a kind of statistical adaptation between the structural exigency of a *place* and its *holder*, but rather calls for a necessarily singular *incarnation*, which is also a necessary *mis-*adaptation of men to their historical roles: 'Incarnation is precisely that: the concrete universal constantly producing itself as the animation and temporalization of individual contingency. Hence, *one* punch, like *one* dance, is indissolubly singular and universal'.⁹ Sometimes, we could add, so is *one* man...

This is the second crucial idea coursing through Sartre's account: the dialectical intelligibility of History is predicated on the relationship between its precarious totalization by praxis and the singularization of this praxis in an individual. For Sartre, to understand our acts dialectically is to understand their insufficiency, their imperfection, their errors; but it is also to understand that there is no History except through this singularization. As we will see below, this will lead Sartre philosophically to develop one of the more notorious watchwords of Marxist practice, if rarely of its theory, namely the notion of *deviation*. Most of the second volume will thus take us through what it means for History – understood here as a totalization of and by praxis – to receive a proper name. Sartre will confront that gnawing question – 'Why Stalin?' – with all its

7 Sartre, 1985, p. 37; Sartre, 1991, p. 26.

8 Sartre, 1985, p. 230; Sartre, 1991, p. 220.

9 Sartre, 1985, p. 50; Sartre, 1991, p. 40. On the triple scarcity of time, means and knowledge manifest in the boxing match, see Sartre, 1985, p. 17; Sartre, 1991, p. 9.

counterfactual shadows, in so doing providing not only a philosophical theory of history (which is something entirely other, and in many ways opposed to, a philosophy of history), but an effort to think the dialectic within the Bolshevik revolution, and indeed within Marxism itself. Much of Sartre's answer to the question of the necessity of Stalinism – to be dialectically answered in terms of *the necessity of the contingency of Stalin* – will be crystallised in his theorising of the *sovereign-individual*, and in his reflections on how history in what he calls *directorial (or dictatorial) societies* is history unified in the common praxis of a leader. Why must the impersonality of the Plan embody itself in the idiosyncrasy of the Leader, the sovereign, the *vozhd*?

In what follows I want to explore some of the many facets of this dialectical theory of revolutionary sovereignty, this 'case of Stalin' which turns out to be much more than a mere example, but a (the?) singular incarnation of the very necessity, at a certain stage, of singularising History in order to unify it. Whether it pronounces a historical judgement or produces a historical portrait of Stalinism that is in any way accurate is not my primary concern here. Two historical presuppositions govern Sartre's account: first, that under conditions of encirclement a policy of forced and accelerated industrialisation-collectivisation was inevitable; second, that this situation demanded the emergence of a single leader, a sovereign. In other words, that the survival of the Bolshevik revolution required a massive burst of socialist primitive accumulation under individual leadership¹⁰ – with the upshot that 'the social logic of Stalinism is indeed inseparable from its individual logic'.¹¹ Rather than interrogating these presuppositions, I want to unfold some of their consequences, investigating both their conceptual productivity and their possible insights into the phenomenon of Stalinism. I also want to think through how they corroborate a Marxist philosophy which is here verified in the breach, namely by a totalization which, as Sartre will recognise, is predicated on the voluntaristic deviation from and disavowal of Marxist theory – in the form of a socialist construction with no pre-existing material tendencies to sustain it – turning Stalinism into an exquisitely paradoxical object for the testing of a Marxist theory of history.¹²

The violence of unity

Much of the *Critique* is founded on the intuition that human praxis involves the incessantly renewed task of conquering a unity of action against the dispersive, corrosive, *inertial* effects of material multiplicity.

10 On socialist primitive accumulation, see 'Le Fantôme de Staline' in Sartre, 1965.

11 Aronson, 1983, p. 124.

12 Ronald Aronson has commented on this predicament as follows: 'Stalin's own power-madness is only the extension *ab initio* of the revolution's own situation-determined weakness'. Aronson, 1983, p. 121.

Yet notwithstanding its tendency to replicate it in the internal workings of the party, and through the simulacrum of the 'pledge' in the cult of personality, the unity of a revolution on the scale of the Bolshevik one cannot be the unity that the group-in-fusion produces and reproduces through its terroristic fraternity. The study of fraternity-Terror and of the *invention of treason* in the first volume taught us that unity is inextricable from the pre-emption of division. The violence of unification is always, to borrow from Étienne Balibar, a *pre-emptive counter-violence*, directed not only at the dissolving danger of the other, but more fundamentally, at the threat of practico-inert materiality itself. That is, for Sartre, the origin of hatred, of the urge to murder, of the refusal of reconciliation. The internalisation of the practico-inert is conflict's condition of intelligibility. The unity of the group – but also that of this precarious and mythical meta-group which is the revolutionary 'nation' – is nothing but its 'permanent practice of reunification'.¹³ Violence is the re-externalisation of the internalised material violence of scarcity. In this sense too, the Bolshevik revolution, with its Stalinist deviation, is much more than a mere example. It is the very drama of praxis, or rather its tragedy, writ impossibly large. And it is as though for Sartre the sheer scale and urgency of the dangers (internal and external, material and ideological) required, *once the revolutionary praxis was unleashed* (as a concrete requirement produced by the praxis, and not as an abstract historical necessity), the crystallisation of the unity in one sovereign individual. The relationship between the historical situation, including the masses swept up in or advancing the revolution, and the individual is stamped with the circularity of a dialectical praxis.

But if the unification of history, through struggle, comes to require a profound singularization, which is to say a personification of unity, then a critique of dialectical reason is obliged to confront the intelligibility of chance, or more specifically, to employ a term critical to Sartre's account, the intelligibility, and even the inevitability, of *idiosyncrasy*. The scandal of this proposition for evolutionist, positivist and/or sociologicistic variants of Marxism is nigh-on total (Sartre often encapsulates them under the rubric of Plekhanovism, gesturing dismissively toward the latter's *On the Role of the Individual in History*). Sartre summarises the issue with great lucidity and irony when he argues that, to the extent that the practico-inert determinations of a group are only revealed as the conditions of its praxis in the project that transcends them, then chance itself is intelligible, meaning that the historical weight of 'Cleopatra's nose' or 'the grain of sand in Cromwell's urethra' can be rationally and dialectically gauged.

It is through the practical comprehension of a group's undertakings and conflicts – through the structured and oriented history of its praxis

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13 Sartre, 1985, p. 77; Sartre, 1991, p. 68.

– that chance will receive the 'necessary margin of indetermination' in which it comes to play a part. It will thus be possible to ponder why it was that the death of Cromwell could be such a blow to his regime while the Soviet Union could instead outlive Stalinism. That said, Sartre stresses that the necessity of the contingency of Stalin is indeed comprehensible: 'Curiously, but very *intelligently*, that individual realized in himself and through his acts the sacrifice of every individual – by himself and by everybody to the unity of the leadership'.¹⁴ The role of chance is a function of the history of the group. In Sartre's eyes, it executes the sentence of praxis. To understand Stalin and Stalinism is thus also, or above all, to understand why the praxis-process of the Russian Revolution could give such latitude to the singularity of Stalin, but also how that singularity, in all its contingency, all its deficits and excesses vis-à-vis the requirements of the revolution, could be adapted to the praxis-process of the Revolution. In other words, how it could fit the revolutionary project *as altered by its own realisation, by the practico-inert materiality and counter-finalities it itself generated or elicited* – from the imperative of industrialisation to the resistance of the peasantry, from the encirclement by bourgeois powers to the weakening of the international revolution as an effect of its 'national' victory.

In the most ideologically provocative and contestable facet of his phenomenology of Stalinism, Sartre tries to grasp how the Revolution made (which is to say altered and deviated) itself in and through Stalin, by revisiting the latter's conflict with Trotsky, and the genesis of the slogan 'Socialism in One Country'.¹⁵ In a move that defines Sartre's entire analysis of Stalinism, he realigns this debate away from a theoretical opposition, treating it as a contrast not between different theories, or different practices, but between what he calls 'practical schemas'. According to Sartre, Stalin and Trotsky in fact could not but grasp the same situation (the devastating consequences of civil war, material penury, military encirclement, the extreme weakness of the working class, food shortages, a need for unity, the imperative of industrialisation, etc.), as encapsulated in the requirement of a 'defensive-constructive' praxis.¹⁶ Yet while that demand is mediated by Trotsky in terms of a horizon of radicalization and universalization (notwithstanding the conjuncture of

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14 Sartre, 1985, p. 104; Sartre, 1991, p. 93. That 'intelligently' seems like a barb aimed at the many oppositionists, like Victor Serge, who dwelled on his intellectual mediocrity.

15 For some critical observations on these passages, with an interesting reference to their similarity to Richard B. Day's *Leon Trotsky and the Politics of Economic Isolation*, see the NLR's editorial 'Introduction to Sartre', cited above.

16 As Aronson remarks, the 'exclusive and dictatorial rule of party over class was the result of a successful proletarian revolution *and* of a numb, prostrate and shrunken working class'; Aronson also cites Moshe Lewin's remarks about the 'two-storied void' (of proletariat and economic infrastructure) over which the Bolsheviks governed, and the manner in which retaining power meant perpetuating half of that void (i.e. proletarian power). See Aronson, 1983, pp. 82-3.

isolation, for the erstwhile leader of the Red Army internationalisation of the revolution remained firmly on the agenda), Stalin's mix of pragmatism and dogmatism, his particularist radicalism, his opportunism with an iron fist –itself a product of his contingent biography, his *facticity* – is especially suited to the situation, not least because of its resonance with revolutionary personnel and masses whose trajectories in many ways mirror that of the Georgian militant rather than of Trotsky. Yet the deep opposition between these practical schemas, more than between abstract principles, ironically needs to latch onto somewhat arbitrary practical differences in order to *force* the differences between camps (Stalin will prove to be a past master at treating contingent differences as opportunities for division, but this was hardly unique to him). But this also means that the 'same' measures, placed within a very different practical orientation, *do* have, according to Sartre, potentially incompatible meanings – not least the policy of collectivisation itself, which will see a kind of internalisation by Stalinism of the vanquished Trotskyist alternative.¹⁷

The non-apologetic (or perhaps better, the tragic) character of Sartre's suggestion about the greater adaptation of Stalin's contingency to the praxis of the Russian Revolution is only clear once we grasp the extent to which it is the enormous 'coefficient of adversity' accompanying the Bolshevik effort, and the immaturity of its human and material base, which together 'select' Stalin. The misery and penury of the revolution is both its main obstacle *and* the very concreteness of the revolution in the situation in which it emerges. Dialectically, the praxis of the revolution produces its own isolation: the international revolutionary movement, repressed with redoubled efforts by Western bourgeoisies, is actually *weakened* by the victory in Russia. The *incarnation* of revolutionary praxis thus contradicts its *universalization* – and saps the resources of Trotskyist radicalism, even before the ravages of the Great Purge. Faced with this tragic, insoluble problem – the 'peripheral' revolution that depended on its internationalisation has generated its own isolation – 'socialism in one country' appears to Sartre as the 'theorisation' of a practical necessity.¹⁸

17 Sartre, 1985, p. 225; Sartre, 1991, pp. 215-16.

18 Aronson sharply encapsulates the thrust, and the provocation, of the second volume of the *Critique* as follows: 'Another of Sartre's major achievements is to show Bolshevism-Leninism-Stalinism as being a single praxis unfolding *and* being created in situation, in the process changing hands and deviating according to the new vicissitudes its agents had to confront. Stalinism was Bolshevik praxis in *that* situation. In correctly stressing this half of the story Sartre avoids the retrospective wishful thinking of all those critiques of Stalinism and even Bolshevism – which insist there was a "better way" to accomplish the same goal'. Aronson, 1987a, p. 139. In his unfortunately neglected *The Dialectics of Disaster*, Aronson, in critical dialogue with both Jean-Paul Sartre and Isaac Deutscher, both of whom he treats as lucid exponents of the *self*-interpretation of Bolshevism, had argued that 'the revolution's deformation was inseparable from its accomplishments'. However, enacting a kind of torsion of the dialectical arguments of his forebears, Aronson ultimately suggests

The Stalinist formula is false, monstrous, but it becomes true as an effect of the praxis-process of revolution (in which it is of course itself an active element). What's more, the pragmatic, stubborn narrowness of Stalin's practical schema, the restriction of his vision to Russian specificity, adapts itself to this monstrous deviation.¹⁹ Whereas Trotskyism seeks to save the 'Western' character of Marxism, Stalin and Stalinism treat the incarnated universality (Marxism as realised and deviated praxis) as the truth of abstract universality. The revolution must be distorted to survive. Further proving Sartre's contention that conflict is always the internalisation of scarcity, of the practico-inert as the materialised alienation of praxis, the conflict pitting Stalin and Trotsky is one that has as its stakes how to deal with the counter-finalities thrown up by the free project of the revolution. Its violence is the internalisation and re-externalisation of the violence of matter against freedom, incarnated in geopolitical hostility, material shortages, the penury and fragmentation of the population. Men, as Sartre will repeatedly note, can only make history to the extent that it makes them, which is also to say to the extent that it *unmakes* them. Communist revolution is so central to the problem of identifying the intelligibility of History, and to Sartre's post-war thinking, precisely to the extent that it is a concerted war against counter-finality, a necessary-impossible effort to abolish anti-human mediations, to 'liquidate' the practico-inert as a field of human alienation – a task that is tragically, if heroically, bound to fail, as praxis under conditions of scarcity cannot but produce the very practico-inert structures which hinder and deflect its intentions, mangle its principles.

We can pause here to note that, though Sartre's references to necessity may suggest that he presents Stalinism as abstractly inevitable his argument is radically different: the necessity of a sovereign-individual leading an accelerated project of isolated industrialisation in the name of socialism is a product of the revolution as a *free praxis* producing its own constraints (its own practico-inertness, its counter-finalities). Urgency and emergency are immanent to the regime that provoked them. Stalin's opportunistic dogmatism is not to be grasped as an abstract practice, an option among many, but as the dialectical product of the revolution itself,

that 'the accomplishments of Stalinism *stemmed* from its irrationality', against 'the illusion of Reason and Progress', 'the myth that the Soviet Union's positive accomplishments were *rational* but its disasters *irrational*'. Aronson, 1983, pp. 71 and 120. Aronson's comments on the 'coldness' of Deutscher's attitude towards the brutalized peasantry (p. 75) could also be applied to Sartre. See also Aronson, 1987b, Aronson and Dobson, 1997, and Birchall, 2004, pp. 173-185, for the political and intellectual context of the second *Critique*.

19 The resolute closure of Stalin's mind to the world beyond Russia and beyond a restrictively defined Marxism was even evident in his library. As his most recent Russian biographer recounts: 'Overall, the classics of Marxism-Leninism (including his own works) and works by their propagandists comprise the vast majority of the nearly four hundred books in which Stalin made notations'. Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*, trans. Nora Seligman Favorov (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 94.

in keeping with what Sartre presents as the two principles of history, namely human action and inert matter, with the latter both *supporting* and *deviating* praxis.²⁰ Stalin's strength is in many ways a function of the deep misery of the revolution, just as his brutal and sovereign unification is the obverse of the profoundly centrifugal, serialising, divisive effects of the revolutionary explosion – which also leads to the popular demand for a kind of absolute certainty, a 'sacred' unity for which the cult of personality is the situated response. In a crucial distinction, Sartre argues that Stalinism is not to be thought of as a *prototype*, a set of abstract imperatives or features which come to be applied in a given situation (this would be the view of a positivist analytical reason shared by many anti-Stalinists, whether Marxist, liberal or conservative) but as an *adventure*, a dialectical historical product. Sartre, while refusing the abstract judgment on Stalinism (as representing one singularly noxious option to be contrasted to preferable ones) is adamant about the baleful character of its unfolding. If Stalinism maintains socialism as the collective appropriation of the means of production, this is but a 'collective appropriation of ruins' in a situation of omnipresent hostility.²¹ The mediation between what Sartre calls the 'abstract' moment of socialisation (or appropriation) and the horizon of common enjoyment (which will eventually mutate in Stalinism into a horizon based on the self-disciplining of all: the withering away of the state as its *complete* internalisation), can, in practice, turn out to be 'hell'.

Permeating Stalinism for Sartre is a will to unity. No doubt, the counter-finalities and obstacles thrown up by revolutionary praxis demand a *voluntarism* which is no less, if differently, present in Stalin's opponents. But the figure of unity that will prevail is marked by his contingency and marks in turn, in particular in leveraging a *Russian* past, the 'national personality' of an 'elected people' (it is unfortunate here that Sartre does not properly explore Lenin's final sallies against the Georgian dictator's 'Great Russian chauvinism'²²). This sovereign praxis forges unity in and against, but also *through*, the dispersions of seriality – as demonstrated, according to Sartre, in the obsession with retaining electoral practices that regularly return mega-majorities, revealing that what 'counted was the determination to find the unity of an entire society,

20 Sartre, 1985, p. 147; Sartre, 1991, pp. 135-6.

21 Sartre, 1985, p. 127; Sartre, 1991, p. 116. This emphasis on socialization is obviously at odds with the numerous theories of Stalinism as merely a simulacrum or inversion of socialism, a private (bureaucratic) appropriation of the 'collective', a state capitalism, a rebooted Asiatic despotism, and so on.

22 Lewin, 2005, pp. 19-31. Though it's not true, as Aronson suggests that Sartre does not mention Lenin at all (Aronson, 1983, p. 94) it is definitely true that he is entirely overshadowed by Stalin's vanquishing of Trotsky, while the potential alternative path precariously sketched out in what Lewin has famously called 'Lenin's last struggle' receives no attention.

by integrating it into an irreversible praxis'.²³ This unity is such that any practice within its field, within its enveloping totalization, receives a positive or negative valence with respect to it. The world of sovereign praxis is a world without 'indifference', but also a world in which the valences of past acts can be brutally inverted in the present. Perhaps the greatest mark of the voluntarist character of this 'Marxist' praxis is the fact that it makes 'its' working class *after* the Revolution. Sartre's characterisation of this voluntarism is extremely significant, as well as perceptive, and worth quoting at some length:

The *voluntarism* of the Stalinist period produced itself on the basis of these practical exigencies. On the one hand, in fact, *this do-it-all-directory* which established itself in the leading strata of the Party learned to demand everything of itself i.e. to replace all the missing or failing technicians during the transition period. On the other hand, the passivity of masses in mid-mutation placed the leaders in a situation where they were demanding everything of these masses, without giving them the least responsibility in exchange. Finally, subordination of the economic to the political was in practice tantamount to subordinating 'is' to ought'. The absolute necessity of cutting corners (combined development) and leaping over a fifty-year lag to catch up the West deprived planning of all flexibility. ... Centralization, necessary at the time of the clandestine struggle, retained its necessity in the period of construction. Possibilities were defined *on the basis of exigencies*, rather than the other way round. You must, therefore you can.²⁴

Toward a theory of bureaucratic voluntarism

We can sense again the elective if necessarily contingent affinity between the inflexibility of the exigencies and the inflexibility of the sovereign. This inflexibility is compounded in a positive feedback effect, in that *spiral* through which the revolutionary process over-determines revolutionary praxis, and the very being of the sovereign group or individual. It is on the background of this extreme directorial and dictatorial voluntarism, the kind so palpable in Stalin's declaration about the revolution knowing no 'objective difficulties', that the heterogenetic character of Soviet praxis – departing from and even inverting revolutionary aims, giving rise to a chaotic welter of anti-finalities – becomes so painfully evident.²⁵ Praxis generates its own reification.

23 Sartre, 1985, p. 135; Sartre, 1991, p. 124.

24 Sartre, 1985, p. 139; Sartre, 1991, pp. 127-8. Translation modified.

25 At a speech to future cadres at Sverdlov University, Stalin declared that 'for us, objective difficulties do not exist. The only problem is cadres. If things are not progressing, or if they go wrong, the cause is not to be sought in any objective conditions: it is the fault of the cadres'. Quoted in Lewin, 2005, p. 33. Consider also the pronouncement of the Stalinist planner S.G. Strumulin: 'We are

As Sartre declares in his discussion of the perverting necessity for the Bolshevik leadership of imposing wage differentials to impel productivity, there is a 'petrifying backlash of praxis upon itself'.²⁶ Stalin's sovereignty is inextricable from Stalinist deviation. As I have already noted, not least of the contributions of the unfinished second volume of the *Critique* is the forging of this concept *against* the deeply idealistic turn given to it by communist sectarianism, and above all by Stalinism itself. The very communism most identified with the vicious hunt for deviations (Trotskyism, Titoism, and all manner of hyphenated variants) is itself portrayed as in a way the greatest deviation of all (though precisely without the idealistic condemnation that the term deviation would usually carry), a deviation produced by the seemingly insurmountable problem of the revolution's survival.

It was necessary to choose between disintegration and *deviation* of the Revolution. Deviation also means detour: Stalin was the man of that detour. 'Hold on! Produce! ... Later generations will go back to principles.' And this was right, except that he did not see how in this very way he was producing generations which contained within them – as the inert materiality of the circumstances to be transcended the deviation that had produced them and that they interiorized. ... The leadership put its intransigence into preserving, at any cost, a reality (rather than a principle): collective ownership of the means of production, inasmuch as this had been realized in *that* moment of History and in *that* particular country. The only way of safeguarding that reality, moreover, was to increase pitilessly, day by day, the rate of production. ... Here again, we may observe that the practical field they organized proposed to them and often imposed upon them the chosen solution.²⁷

Though exploring this connection would take us too far afield, one is reminded here of Sartre's dramaturgy of deviation, of the revolutionary spirals of praxis and counter-finality, presented in the soliloquies of Hoederer in *Dirty Hands* and Jean Aguerre in *In the Mesh*.

bound by no laws. There are no fortresses the Bolsheviks cannot storm'. Quoted in Aronson, 1983, p. 104.

²⁶ Sartre, 1985, p. 140; Sartre, 1991, p. 129.

²⁷ Sartre, 1985, pp. 140-1; Sartre, 1991, p. 129. Consider also this definition of deviation: 'as we ponder in the present chapter over the relationship between the dialectic and the anti-dialectic, here is a first example of their possible relations. One closed upon the other, in order to dissolve and assimilate it. It succeeded only by the realization of a generalized cancer. In so far as the practico-inert (i.e. the anti-dialectic) was used and suffused by the dialectic, praxis (as a constituted dialectic) was poisoned from within by the anti-dialectic. The deviation was the anti-dialectical reconditioning of the dialectic; it was the sovereign praxis, inasmuch as this was (partially) itself an antidialectic'. Sartre, 1985, p. 295; Sartre, 1991, p. 285. 'Deviation' and 'detour' had already been discussed in 'Le Fantôme de Staline' (1956-7), where Sartre, however, had referred to Stalinism as a detour *rather* than a deviation. See Sartre, 1965, p. 233.

Much of the account of Stalin as a detour which praxis *made inevitable* relies on Sartre's dialectical narrative about the working class, about its atomisation, serialisation, and extreme weakness, as well as about the role of planned social stratification and incentives as both the means *and the obstacle* to the eventual socialisation of production. The sovereign, dictatorial making of the Soviet working class, in its deep heteronomy, is also a constant *unmaking*, a perpetual fragmentation of that working class which is compelled to find its unity *outside of itself*, in the sovereign itself. But Sartre insists that this same working class, in its limits and its weakness, *makes* its own leaders. Such is the circularity of revolutionary praxis, which makes dictatorship into something other than the imposition of a *diabolus ex machina*, just as, in his foray into the cruel postwar decrepitude of Stalinism, for Sartre there is a circularity between the popular racism of the Russian masses and Stalin's anti-semitic campaigns. While the details of Sartre's account – from the discussion of wage differentials to the dialectical inversion of the industrialisation of a rural country into the ruralisation of the working class, its invasion by peasant 'barbarians' – could be explored (and contested) at length, its structuring principles are quite clear.

The result of this sovereign monopolisation of history, of this gigantic alienation of the working masses, is not only a new order, which, as Sartre pessimistically notes, is *like any other order* the coercive organisation of penury, but a kind of systemic paradox, which he had already touched upon in his long reflection in *Les temps modernes* on the events of Hungary, 'Le Fantôme de Staline': what had appeared as systemic penury in a capitalism where workers were formally free becomes a subjective responsibility, in a socialism in which workers may be deemed directly responsible for their own penury as well as that of other workers, and of the nation as a whole. The sovereign praxis of Stalinism thus engenders a *voluntarist bureaucracy* in a permanent conflict against an uncultured, disunited mass, with workers knowing and perceiving themselves to be in the practical field of the sovereign. The ubiquity of Stalin's image, of Stalin's gaze, is also a spectacular representation of this reality of action, as the manipulated inertia of the Soviet mass reveals in its very seriality the unity of sovereign praxis, and the internalisation of that sovereignty: 'not just on all the walls as peerless face of the Soviet adventure, but as a structure of interiorized inertia in everyone. In everyone, he was the living (and deceptive) image of pledged passivity, and also the concrete unity of all wills occurring in individuals as a strictly individual but *other* will (i.e. as a concrete imperative)'.²⁸ The Soviet individual is conversely Other to the sovereign, to Stalin:

.....
²⁸ Sartre, 1985, p. 210; Sartre, 1991, p. 200.

if the propaganda had succeeded he grasped the sovereign's totalization as the depth of his own totalization. His practical field was the country, as it was for the Politburo and its expert assistants, and if he had been able to develop his knowledge and functions infinitely, he would merely have rediscovered the total depth of his own field. In a certain way, the sovereign totalization was his powerlessness and ignorance: he was determined by it in his negative particularity. In another way, however, it was his possible knowledge and his own participation in the praxis of all. For individuals, the sovereign was the mediation between their ignorance as particularity and their total knowledge as possible totalization of the country by each and every person.²⁹

As enveloping totalization, the sovereign is the very emblem and focus of totalising knowledge. Where a communist utopianism had imagined a horizontal transparency of proletarian praxis (this was still the organising dream of Dziga Vertov's *kino-eye* and its revolutionary transcendence of cinema), in this deviated revolution, all knowledge is knowledge of the sovereign, which is why the cognitive figure is transformed into a 'religious' one: for Sartre, the alienation into the leadership is ultimately a form of the *sacred*.

The 'necessity' of Stalinism, the historical conditioning or determinism that makes his rise something other than a mere fluke or curse, is not a generic but a practical necessity: given *such* a praxis in *such* conditions, this was phenomenon was, in its necessary contingency, 'inevitable'. Its inevitability is not a positivist-analytical, but a dialectical one, which requires thinking how praxis, through a host of 'petrifying backlashes' conditions itself, creates the very exigencies to which it is obliged to respond. In other words, this is not so much an objective as a processual or subjective-objective necessity. It is also a dramatic, or tragic necessity, of the very kind that Sartre had tried to explore in his theatre. It also differs from the necessity projected by a modernization theory, which would postulate an autonomous economic domain making its demands on the political sphere. Praxis does not respond to necessity, it creates it. It is a praxis-*process*, in Sartre's terminology, inasmuch as action is surpassed and overcome or overwhelmed by its own, practico-inert, products, its own alienations or deviations.

In this respect Stalinism (necessarily?) involved a profound disavowal of its own practice. While denied objective limitations it also incessantly justified its leadership and authority on the basis of the objective exigencies of the project, creating a markedly different notion and practice of sovereignty than the one we are familiar with from the history of Western political thought. Inasmuch as it was constitutively incapable of avowing the circularity of its praxis, the way in which the

²⁹ Sartre, 1985, p. 171; Sartre, 1991, pp. 158-9.

mediation and alienation of praxis by inert matter makes a sovereign into its own 'enemy', it presented all resistance as subjective enmity, as an *other voluntarism*. That is how an uncoordinated drop in peasant deliveries of grain could become a 'grain strike'.

Stalinist praxis, in its insistence of stamping its will, the will of the Plan, upon history is thus the incessant, and paradoxically entangled, production of seriality *and* unity. In order to subordinate all social life to the Plan it must maintain, reproduce, intensify the atomisation of the masses, what Sartre calls the seriality of impotence: 'by virtue of its inertia [the] mass became an apparatus you could operate like a lever, provided only that you knew how to use the passive forces of seriality. It was then integrated into the common praxis like a hammer in the hands of a carpenter; it was transcended and objectified in the results it inscribed in the practical field. However paradoxical it may seem, in fact, the leading group *totalized* the various series as series'.³⁰ Mass oppression is then for Sartre not the abstract aim but the dialectical product of the field of action created by sovereign praxis, which further alienates the horizon of the group-in-fusion, the egalitarian revolutionary 'Apocalypse' whereof he wrote in the first volume of the *Critique*, into a long-term project in the hands, and minds, of the leadership.

Confronted with the voluntarist subjectivity of the sovereign (whether as group or individual), which must imagine himself as *without passivity* (as indeed must his anti-communist critics, also suffering from the 'activist illusion'), what is not subjective always appears as subjective. This is the sense in which Terror is for Sartre inextricable from a kind of *optimism*:

Voluntarist optimism is necessarily Terror: it *has to* underestimate the adversity-coefficient of things. Hence, in the name of its confidence in man's power, it ignores the resistance of inertia, counter-finality, or the slowness of osmosis and impregnation (inasmuch as they increase the scarcity of time): it knows only treason. In this sense *too* i.e. in its inner temporalization action is Manichaean, as Malraux said.³¹

Somewhat perversely, Sartre will thus conclude that:

it was not wrong to speak of a 'strike'. That was not wrong from the standpoint of the sovereign and the towns, and in so far as the urban ensembles saw supply from the standpoint of socialist construction as a necessary means *not just to live, but to win the battles they were waging*. It was not wrong for the sole reason that, in the milieu of action, everything

³⁰ Sartre, 1985, p. 160; Sartre, 1991, p. 148.

³¹ Sartre, 1985, p. 185; Sartre, 1991, p. 173.

is always action (positive or negative), and the more urgent praxis is, the more the resistance of the inert inasmuch as it necessarily manifests itself through men appears as *sabotage*.³²

Whence what Sartre terms the 'black humour' of the Terror, as in this example drawn from Hungarian Stalinism: 'Thus it was that when the engineers came to explain to Rakosi, after a few months' work, that the subsoil of Budapest was not suitable for the construction of a metro, he had them thrown into prison: through them, it was the subsoil he was imprisoning.'³³

Stalin and the necessity of contingency

Concentrated into the person of Stalin, the bureaucratic voluntarism of the Plan, with its ferocious subjectivism, requires that the history of the Revolution be told as a 'dialectical biography',³⁴ synthesising the idiosyncrasies and embodied past of Stalin as an individual organism with his enveloping, totalising role as sovereign individual. This encompassing hypertrophy or apotheosis of individuality is analysed by Sartre as follows:

As a common individual, Stalin was not a mere *person*. He was a human pyramid, deriving his practical sovereignty from all the inert structures and from all the support of every leading sub-group (and every individual). So he was everywhere, at all levels and every point of the pyramid, since his totalizing praxis was transcendence and preservation of all structures, or – if you like since his praxis was the synthetic temporalization of that entire inert structuration. But conversely, inasmuch as he was not just a man called Stalin but *the sovereign*, he was *retotalized* in himself by all the complex determinations of the pyramid. He was produced by everyone as interiorizing in the synthetic unity of an individual the strata, the hierarchy, the zones of cleavage, the serial configurations, etc., which were precisely the passive means of his action and the inert directions of the regroupments he carried out. In other words, as soon as Stalin had taken personal power, he was incarnated in the pyramid of ruling bodies and that pyramid was incarnated in him. This common individual, as a sovereign, was *in addition* a collective individual.³⁵

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid. Consider too this, from a February 1937 edition of *Pravda*: 'not one accident should go unnoticed. We know that assembly lines do not stop by themselves, machines do not break by themselves, boilers do not burst by themselves. Someone's hand is behind every such act. Is it the hand of the enemy? That is the first question we should ask in such cases.' Quoted in Aronson, 1983, p. 126.

34 Sartre, 1985, p. 228; Sartre, 1991, p. 217. Fredric Jameson has commented brilliantly on the centrality of biography to Sartre's thought in his *Marxism and Form*. See, Jameson, 1974, p. 210.

35 Sartre, 1985, p. 209; Sartre, 1991, p. 199.

The biological and historical contingency of Stalin, his existential *facticity*, comes to over-determine sovereign Soviet praxis – and also to establish, in an even more intimate and intense way that in the first volume of the *Critique*, the close conceptual bond between the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* and the Marxist philosopher of the late 1950s.

Sovereignty socialises the individual who serves as its bearer; but, due to the complex mediations between individual facticity and the revolutionary praxis-process, that relationship can never be without remainder, as it would be, in Sartre's bitter hypothesis, were the revolution to be led by an 'angel', impersonally adapted to its myriad exigencies. The sovereign-individual is always in excess and deficit of his 'structural' place. To the extent that, according to Sartre's crowning assumption, the praxis of the Plan requires incarnation in a man – and, vice versa, the projection of the unity of an individual organism onto the dispersion of the groups that make up the revolutionary nation, the stamp of its factual biological unity – the deviations that the sovereign's 'idiosyncrasies' lend to praxis become even more momentous, or indeed catastrophic. It is at this juncture that the conceptual apparatus of *Being and Nothingness* is explicitly applied to a Soviet experience whose deviation is crucially bound to personal sovereignty:

what is given in each person is merely their *contingency*, which means – precisely in so far as Stalin is not his own foundation and his facticity constitutes him as a certain individual among others, who does not derive from himself the reasons for his differences (in relation *to others*) and his originality (in the sense in which every determination is a negation) that the total praxis of a society in the course of industrialization is imbued, down to its deepest layers, with this contingency.

That is ultimately the dialectical irony, and tragedy, of a political praxis which, in trying to master the very counter-finalities to which it gave rise, demanded for Sartre a brutal and gargantuan effort of unification, a unification that – grimly refunctioning the very logic of absolutist sovereignty that the proletarian revolution was meant to abrogate – was an extreme *personification*, '*the deviation of praxis by its incarnation*'.³⁶ And this deviation was in its turn conditioned by that

36 Sartre, 1985, p. 236; Sartre, 1991, p. 225. Aronson summarizes the points as follows: 'Once society turns to a sovereign individual, *it* becomes individualized in *him* and his personal peculiarities are decisive'. Aronson, 1987a, p. 138. We could also note how personification was also at work in the far-from-impersonal apparatus of the Great Terror, most horrifyingly in the figure of Vasily Blokhin, chief executioner of the NKVD and directly responsible for thousands of deaths (including up to 7000 at Katyn), personally carried out with a revolver while wearing a butcher's apron. See the chapter on the Butovo shooting range in Karl Schlögel's vast and kaleidoscopic *Moscow, 1937* (Schlögel, 2014), a book whose range and insight – not least into the everyday, even festive, obverse of the Terror – makes a formidable testing-ground for any future critique of dialectical reason.

second principle of history alongside human action or praxis, namely inert matter, the domain of the practico-inert, of the counter-finalities with which, in a sense, the revolution encircled itself. As Sartre writes:

There is a poverty of historical praxis inasmuch as it is itself a struggle against poverty, and this poverty as an inner dialectic of scarcity always reveals itself in the result, which will be at worst a terminal failure and at best a deviation. ... Stalin as an individualization of the social: i.e. of praxis as poverty incarnated the dialectical intelligibility of all the inner poverties of the practical field, from the shortage of machines to the peasants' lack of education. ... Incarnated and singularized, the working-class Revolution deviated to the point of demanding the sovereignty of a single person. And this sovereign, born of a deviation, pushed it to the bitter end and revealed in the very contingency of his policy, i.e. of his own facticity, that praxis as an incarnation deviated by its own counter-finalities, by its heritage and by the ensemble of the practico-inert had to lead to the ultimate concrete individualization, by virtue of the very contingency of the unforeseeable and differential deviations which it had necessarily given itself without knowing it, through the idiosyncratic mediation of the required sovereign.³⁷

As Fredric Jameson perceptively explores in his introduction to volume 2 of the *Critique*, Sartre never developed his study of the intelligibility of history to the domain of liberal, market, capitalist societies.³⁸ Among the philosophical reasons for the interruption of this philosophical and critical project we could count the deep affinity between, on the one hand, Sartre's existentialist and biographical dialectic³⁹ and, on the other, the phenomenon of this revolution deviated by the facticity of its sovereign. This was a facticity whose impact on the lives of millions is testament to the way in which historical praxis – as against capital's 'automatic subject' – is tragically bound up with scarcity, a scarcity that produced Stalin as the alienation, the petrifying backlash of the revolution.

37 Sartre, 1985, pp. 236-7; Sartre, 1991, pp. 225-6.

38 Jameson, 2009, pp. 241-53.

39 With its crucial concern for biography, making the copious, unfinished volumes on Flaubert perhaps the proper sequel to the study of Stalinism in the second volume of the *Critique*.

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