

Michael Scriven, Jean-Paul Sartre: Politics and Culture in Postwar France

Sam Coombes

In response—notably to the publication of *Le Siècle de Sartre* by the high-profile philosopher and novelist Bernard-Henri Lévy, there has been a considerable renewal of interest in Sartre in France in the last year. Sartre’s work has suffered a comparative critical neglect for some years in his home country and Lévy’s wide-ranging and provocative book does much to reaffirm the centrality of Sartre in twentieth century French thought. Michael Scriven’s latest contribution to the critical debate about Sartre in the Anglophone context, although rather different in its focus, similarly seeks to emphasize the lasting importance and continuing relevance of Sartre’s intellectual and political concerns to the contemporary world. Scriven sets out to elucidate the ways in which the political and the cultural uniquely intersect in Sartre’s writings and form a synthesis such that each is constantly illuminating of the other. Scriven divides his material into two parts and their respective titles, ‘Sartre’s Revolutionary Politics’ and ‘Sartre’s Cultural Politics’, clearly suggest that it is the political dimension in Sartre, in its various manifestations in his life and writings, which is to be the unifying theme of the study. This suggestion is borne out by the importance which Scriven explicitly attaches, at numerous points, to situating Sartre in the French socio-political context of his time. Central to Scriven’s argument throughout is the important claim, for example, that the originality and dynamism of Sartre’s work owes much to the tension between his commitment to active engagement in political debate and revolutionary politics under the Fourth Republic whilst continuing to employ the intellectual methods which he acquired under the Third Republic and the cultural forms characteristic of that period.

Wisely avoiding any attempt to provide a comprehensive account of Sartre’s politics and cultural production, Scriven has deliberately selected specific case-studies for critical scrutiny. There is nevertheless breadth in this specificity as Scriven, setting his project apart from the tendency to treat Sartre as a quasi-hermetic object of study, makes the relationship between Sartre and other French political and cultural figures and movements

the focus of a number of his chapters. The account of Sartre's involvement with French Maoist politics in the post-1968 period is particularly illuminating. Scriven offers an account of Sartre's attitude to revolutionary violence and of his relationship to the revolutionary press that puts paid to the misconception that he became submerged in a crude, ill-conceived leftist radicalism. Sartre's political writings of the period reveal that he made a distinction between arbitrary acts of terrorist violence, which were of no value to the revolutionary cause, and what Scriven describes as 'organic class violence', which were justifiable acts of retaliatory violence in response to the numerous forms of oppression effected and maintained by the ruling élite. And if Sartre became a staunch defender of and contributor to radical journals such as *La Cause du Peuple* and *La Cause du Peuple-J'Accuse*, it was not long before he was making criticisms of their tendency towards facile ideological sloganising and sectarianism. Scriven's analysis of the Nizan Affair gives special attention to the relationship of Nizan and Sartre to the French Communist party and highlights the tension between the temperamental affinities and the diverging ideological tendencies of the two writers. This paradox, most apparent during the 1930s, gradually dissolves, Scriven seems to suggest, the more Sartre tended subsequently towards the Communist party; the sectarian, 'imperialistic' side of Sartre's character, like that of Nizan before him, ultimately was such that he too was drawn towards a political party which exhibited similar characteristics. Scriven's account of the polemical debate about Nizan in 1947 employs this not altogether unproblematic interpretation of Sartre's development to good effect. Sartre was forced into the contradictory position of wanting to clear Nizan's name of charges of treachery, but of not wanting to appear hostile to Nizan's Communist accusers because he was coming to feel increasingly in sympathy with the Communist party and because his imperialistic, sectarian temperament ruled out the possibility of a more liberal-minded defense of Nizan. Scriven's chapter on the diverging values and attitudes of Sartre and de Gaulle gives welcome breadth to his analysis of Sartre in relation to his socio-political context by extending the boundaries of the discussion beyond the preoccupations of the French left. Although his account of the authoritarian style of leadership and 'rootedness' of de Gaulle and the libertarian discourse and psychological 'rootlessness' of Sartre perhaps suffers because of the all too apparently stark opposition that any comparison of the two figures must involve, what is refreshing here, as in the chapter on Sartre and Nizan, is the way that Scriven relates psychological tendencies to ideological affiliations, the personal and the political.

Sartre's postwar cultural production has quite possibly received more critical attention than any other area of his output. Scriven avoids retreading familiar ground by selecting lesser known works as case-studies. The introductory chapter of this second part of the book reaffirms emphasizes that, culturally as well as politically, Sartre's work should be seen as transitional, that is divided and in constant evolution between one period and another. Here, as elsewhere, Scriven's ability to condense a set of complex considerations into clear, readable prose is put to valuable use. Yet, in general this latter section of the book is not as successful ultimately as its predecessor in achieving what it sets out to

do. Scriven gives welcome attention to Sartre's *Nekrassov* and to his pieces on the art of Giacometti, and makes many insightful remarks about their political implications. And, as always, his account is livened up by the unusual and unexpected sources that he refers to, in many cases owing to his work on Sartre's relationship with the media.¹ But as an attempt to capture the synthesis of the political and the cultural at the heart of Sartre's intellectual enterprise this falls some way short. It seems that, for Scriven, accounting for Sartre's 'cultural politics', in broad terms, amounts to explaining how Sartre's cultural production and his art criticism developed in relation to the changing postwar socio-political climate and to his increasingly explicit affiliation with the ideologies of existentialism and communism. Thus, Sartre's 'ideological art criticism' is a particular kind of criticism in that Sartre interprets Giacometti's work almost exclusively through the lens of his existentialist world view. And the form of *Nekrassov* marks a clear departure from that of Sartre's earlier plays in line with his move towards a more unequivocally pro-Communist position. Yet what is missing here is any in-depth consideration of the relation of the cultural domain to the ideological and the political in the first place. The assumption which Scriven's analysis seems to rest on, with regard to the cultural and the political, is that Sartre's criticism and cultural production of his pre-Marxist phase does not have to be accounted for in political terms; in short, that there is the political on the one hand and the cultural on the other and that they meet up only at the point when the writer adopts a political position which has a strongly defined ideological dimension. Here Scriven reveals his own liberal assumptions about the nature of both the political and, in particular, the cultural which, in fact, he rightly and approvingly identifies as having been seriously called into question by the later Sartre.

This thorny issue ultimately points to a more fundamental one which concerns the matter of what is understood by the 'political'. Clearly, much of the overall argument of *Jean-Paul Sartre: Politics and Culture in Postwar France* rests on the question of what the political is assumed to involve, of what it does and does not entail. The separate discussions of Sartre's (existentialist) ideological art criticism and of *Nekrassov* would seem to suggest that Scriven gives a broad definition to the political; Sartre's desire to portray Giacometti as an existentialist artist-hero can be seen as a kind of political act just as his decision to write a play which is hostile to the anti-Communist press undoubtedly is. However, for much of the time the political sphere for Scriven does not seem to extend beyond discussion of features of the French political and social landscape, almost no consideration being given to questions of political philosophy. There is very little analysis of the philosophical debate about political ideas amongst French leftist intellectuals or between Sartre and his critics in the Communist party. Consequently, in places Scriven brushes over complex and contestable issues rather schematically as, for example, when he states, without any further explanation, that *L'Être et le néant* "offered an alternative philosophical system to Marxism."² In view of the fact that, prior to the 1950s, Sartre was a more competent philosopher and creative writer than he was a political thinker, some examination of the battle of ideas between

the existentialists and the Marxists would surely have been beneficial to this account of Sartre's postwar politics. And it seems that such a philosophical discussion is even more important still, perhaps crucial, to the attempt to explain the synthesis of the political and the cultural in Sartre's work, not only in view of the important role that philosophy plays in much of Sartre's political theorizing and in his fiction, but also in the light of the many and diverse ruminations of Western Marxist theorists in particular on questions pertaining to the relationship between politics and culture.

Jean-Paul Sartre: Politics and Culture in Postwar France is undoubtedly a welcome and valuable addition to the library of Anglophone Sartre criticism. In particular, Scriven reminds us of the necessity of viewing Sartre's life and work in its political and social context and his account, notably thanks to his liking for thematic juxtapositions which relate Sartre to other political and cultural tendencies, presents a picture not just of Sartre but of the French postwar period in its socio-political and cultural dimensions. However, it may come as something of a disappointment to those familiar with Scriven's admirable study of Nizan³ and his *Sartre and the Media*. In relation to the latter, Scriven's last book on Sartre, the considerably greater ambitiousness of this project is clear, and although Scriven's arguments and analyses are for the most part persuasive and forceful, it seems that he does not ultimately take them far enough, in terms of examining their philosophical underpinnings and implications, for his study to meet the high expectations which its title inevitably inspires.

Notes

1. Michael Scriven, *Sartre and the Media* (Ipswich: Macmillan, 1993).
2. Michael Scriven, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Politics and Culture in Postwar France* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999) 50.
3. Michael Scriven, *Paul Nizan: Communist Novelist* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).

Michael Scriven, Jean-Paul Sartre: Politics and Culture in Postwar France (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999) xv + 193pp.

Copyright © 2001 Sam Coombes, *Contretemps*. All rights reserved.